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THE *LIVELY PEGGY*

BY THE SAME AUTHOR



THE HOUSE OF THE WOLF
THE NEW RECTOR
THE STORY OF FRANCIS CLUDDE
A GENTLEMAN OF FRANCE
THE MAN IN BLACK
UNDER THE RED ROBE
MY LADY ROTHIA
MEMOIRS OF A MINISTER OF FRANCE
THE RED COCKADE
SHREWSBURY
THE CASTLE INN
SOPHIA
COUNT HANNIBAL
IN KINGS' BYWAYS
THE LONG NIGHT
THE ABBESS OF VLAYE
STARVECROW FARM
CHIPPINGE
LAID UP IN LAVENDER
THE WILD GEESE
OVINGTON'S BANK
THE GREAT HOUSE
THE TRAVELLER IN THE FUR CLOAK
THE QUEEN'S FOLLY

THE LIVELY PEGGY

BY

STANLEY J. WEYMAN

Author of "Under the Red Robe," "A Gentleman of France"
"Ovington's Bank," "The Queen's Folly," etc.

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WEYMAN

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THE *LIVELY PEGGY*

THE *LIVELY* PEGGY

CHAPTER I

THE news came in by the weekly boat from Plymouth that, weather permitting, served Yealmpton and Kingsbridge and Beremouth of a Wednesday, returning on Thursday. It was but whispered aboard, and that furtively; for the Blighs came back on the boat, a sombre, repellent couple, to whom a fine seafaring delicacy gave a wide berth. The men and the tidings, therefore, came ashore at Beremouth together. But news travels on a fair wind, and no man knows how, and before the Captain's wooden leg, steering a course between the tubs and brown nets, had stumped across the stony wharf scaly with fishes' heads, or his son's face, dark and grim, had been more than espied at his elbow, the whisper was already fleeting before them up the cobbled street. Already in the parlour of the Privateersman — the dim picture outside is taken by the eye of faith for a portrait of Ozias Copestake himself — and in the snug of the Keppel Head, men were settling down to a breezy, leisurely discussion of the verdict, its justice and its consequences.

Down by the water's edge, among the fishing-nets and tubs, and in Budgen's Cove on the farther side of the headland — for within five minutes and by a seeming miracle the news was known even there — the feeling ran all one way. In spite of his regular recurrent bouts, and though there were a dozen men in Beremouth who had at one time or another retrieved his grey head from the gutter, or guided him staggering across the churchyard to his cottage, the old Captain

was taken by the simple for a gentleman. His patient face, his mild dignity, and a life which, between times, was all that a half-pay officer's should be, had won the respect and his failing the indulgence of men ready to own that they would have tripped more often had they had the means. Tales of an unobtrusive helpfulness, that shed a pleasant light on his threadbare, frogged coat, were current, and faith was large and generous. In a word, if the Captain, as was notorious, carried his liquor ill, the fact was held to be his misfortune rather than his fault.

That his son, the Lieutenant, shared the misfortune had come, however, as a surprise to Beremouth, and was, it was owned, a matter that called for deeper reflection, and another pot at least. And drunk on duty? Certainly a man might do better than that, for there was a time for everything — so much was grudgingly admitted even in the snug of the Keppel Head. And had the Lieutenant stood alone, 'serve him right!' might even by the water-side have confirmed the verdict that dismissed him, a lieutenant of six years' standing and one day's ignominy, from the Service. For the son was less well known than his father and less liked. He was something of a mystery. A soured, disappointed young fellow — even before this final disaster — with none of the old man's mild courtesy, he kept himself to himself and held his head high, his dour gloom making, with all his good looks, but few friends; while his now declared weakness had not been patent enough to claim the indulgence of fellow-feeling.

Still in rough, rig-and-furrow-clad breasts liking for the father pleaded for the son; and after all a young man who had lost his arm in a cutting-out affair in the Bay, and had been shabbily treated — so report said — when the honours were dealt out, seemed to deserve some respect if he failed of sympathy. So 'Poor devil!' and 'Hard luck!' summed up in the main the water-side verdict, and more than one could have found it in his heart to tackle the old Captain as

he plodded humbly up the street, and to say a word in the way of good feeling. But a glance at the son's black brow drove the kindly thought back to its home again, and though many eyes were upon them the two could not have had a clearer path up the street if a fire had gone before them.

'He takes it hard,' said one. 'Ay, ay,' another agreed, 'it's gone home to him.' And with a dim sense that they were looking on a tragedy the speakers watched the couple out of sight.

To hide their heads, to escape from curious glances and the pity that was worse, was the aim of both, and all that was left to them. But to gain the cottage that clung to the farther slope and looked down on Budgen's Cove they had to cross the neck of the headland, and every weary yard they climbed, the Captain hanging on his son's arm, was a purgatory. They bore it, each after his fashion; the father limping patiently on, his shamed face bent on the roadway — with him life, even before this last and fatal blow, had gone hardly, and age had no longer spirit to rebel; the son with head erect, his seared heart glaring from his eyes in hard, bitter defiance of the world. As they crossed the churchyard on the summit — solitary and quiet enough this — and passed by the western end of the church, the Lieutenant did for one moment turn his gaze aside. He looked down the lane that led to the Rectory, and his lip quivered. But he set it firm again. There was an end of that! An end of that!

'We will have some tea,' the Captain muttered. He found comfort in the prospect, though he sighed.

'Yes, father, we will have some tea,' the son agreed, and his voice in its gentleness belied his stormy eyes. They left the churchyard behind them, and began the descent, the old man's scanty coat-skirts fluttering, blown aside by the breeze.

But the water-side and the poorer quarters were not the whole of Beremouth; and in proportion as the tidings travelled abroad, and broad-cloth, less pervious to feeling,

took the place of woollen guernseys, sympathy with the culprit waned, and gave place to condemnation. Yet there were exceptions. Sir Albergy Wyke, the Squire of Upper Bere, whose curricule was often to be seen in these days waiting in the Rectory Lane, and who, as it chanced, brought the news to the Portnals at the Rectory, took a kindly view of the case. 'I am sorry,' he said, when he had told the tale. 'Upon my honour, I'm sorry — for the father, at any rate. It's a sad blow for him.'

But Augusta, the elder Portnal girl, was firm. 'I think your sorrow is thrown away,' she said, letting her work fall on her lap. 'The old man has disgraced himself so often that a little more can be no matter. But you always had a weakness for him, Sir Albergy. For my part, I don't see what else you could expect!'

'After all the man is a gentleman.'

'Is he?' Augusta smiled. 'I confess he never seemed to be one to me.'

'He wears a shabby coat,' her sister said, bending so low over her book that her ringlets hid her face.

'Well, if you ask me, his conduct matches it,' Augusta rejoined. 'In a man of his age it is disgraceful.'

'He's only a half-pay captain.' There was a faint note of scorn in Peggy's tone.

'He came to us once or twice,' Augusta explained languidly, 'when he first appeared, you know. You asked us to invite him, if you remember, Sir Albergy. But I could never see anything in him but a shabby old man dreadfully given to drink, and without a word to say for himself.'

'He is poor,' Peggy said. She bent still lower over her page. 'That is what Augusta would see. But he was always sober when he came to us.'

'My dear, I am saying exactly what ——'

'Oh, I am sure you are just, Augusta. You always are. But not generous.'

'Augusta shrugged her handsome shoulders — her figure

was as perfect as her smile was gracious. 'My dear,' she said indulgently, 'you are silly about him. She is perfectly silly about him, Sir Albery. What two opinions can there be about a man who disgraces his white hairs by lying drunk in the street — every quarter day, I am told, as regularly as the day comes round?'

'He might do it more often,' Peggy objected. 'No doubt it would be more respectable if he fell under the table once a week, as I hear some friends of ours do.'

'I hope you do not mean that for me,' Wyke said with a smile. He had listened, glancing now at one and now at the other, as each spoke.

'If the cap fits,' Peggy rejoined rather pertly.

'Peggy! For shame!' Augusta remonstrated. 'How can you be so rude?'

'Fortunately the cap does not fit,' Sir Albery rejoined. 'Or I'm sure, Miss Portnal, that your sister would not have offered it.'

'It appears to fit the son,' Augusta remarked neatly. 'It is clear that he is as bad as, or worse than, his father. And now, disgraced beyond redemption. Even Peggy cannot deny that.'

'Well, I'm devilish sorry for him, all the same,' Wyke said, summing up in haste, for the discussion was growing warm. But whether the sympathy that he expressed was real, or was due to a desire to please Miss Peggy, who seemed to have taken a side in the matter, was uncertain. 'The old man with all his faults is a good officer, and the Fencibles were never better drilled. So far as I am concerned, I don't know that it matters if he takes a roll now and then — as long as he comes sober on parade.'

'But,' Augusta said, smiling, 'the son does not come sober on parade.'

'No, I allow it, and that's the devil's own luck!'

'I should rather say,' she retorted, 'the gentleman's own fault, Sir Albery. If you can call him a gentleman. T&

my mind father and son are much of a muchness, and impossible, both of them. The young man has been here once or twice, but as he appeared to be at odds with everyone — and I confess he seemed to me to be a person of very considerable conceit — it is as well this has happened to close the chapter and the acquaintance.'

Peggy's face sank lower over her book. The ringlets hid it entirely now. But whatever the younger Portnal girl lacked, she did not lack spirit, and 'It's plain,' she said sweetly, 'that he did not pay court to Augusta, Sir Albery? Her smile appears to have failed of its effect for once.'

'My dear, do not be impertinent!'

Sir Albery looked the discomfort that he felt. 'I hardly know the son, though I have met him,' he said. 'He kept very much to himself when he was here, I understand. The loss of his arm, poor chap — well, it is hard on a man of his age. I should feel it myself, I know. And there is a tale gone about — wasn't he due for promotion and not sent up, or something of that kind? I think I have heard that.'

'Such tales are easily told,' Augusta decided. 'And the less their weight the farther they carry, I fancy.'

But at that Peggy's patience, worn thin before, failed her. She looked up, and her heightened colour and sparkling eyes — for Peggy, though she was not handsome after Augusta's fashion, was very pretty when she lost her temper — declared open unmistakable war. 'Would you like to hear the story, Sir Albery?' she asked, her voice quivering with feeling. 'If so, I will tell it, for it was in the papers, and I happen to know it. Mr. Bligh was first on the *Naiad*, attending the *Galatea* of Arcachon, when the *Galatea* drove the French *Andromaque* on shore — you may remember the affair? The *Naiad* was sent in to burn the *Andromaque* and bring off the crew. The *Naiad's* captain was hurt and put out of action; the command fell to Mr. Bligh, and though his arm was crushed by the recoil of a gun, he kept the deck and burned the French vessel, and he should by rule have got his step. But

Sir Borlase Warren, who commanded the squadron, gave all the credit to the *Galatea* and did not mention the *Naiad*, and Mr. Bligh got nothing but, being disabled, a poor place in the Dockyard at Devonport.'

'Devilish hard case !' Wyke replied warmly. 'If that is so.'

'You seem, Peggy, to know a great deal about it,' Augusta said. 'But what has that to do with his misbehaviour, even if the story be true, my dear, which I greatly doubt ? He told it you himself, I suppose ?'

'Yes,' Peggy retorted, and defiance spoke in her tone. 'He did.'

'Oh !' Augusta's voice was full of meaning, and Wyke wished himself away. 'Silly, silly child ! Of course, Sir Alberty, you may believe just as much of that as you please.'

Peggy lowered her face over her book, and the curls hid the angry tear that fell on the page. Fortunately at that moment Dr. Portnal entered the room, and, 'Ha, Wyke,' he said, greeting the visitor in the sonorous tone that matched his stately figure, 'glad to see you ! You've heard the news ? It's all over the town by this time, I suppose.' He stepped to the bell-rope, pulled it, and returned to his place on the hearth. 'A sad business ! A very sad business ! But I am not surprised — like father, like son, eh ? *Ebrii ambo* ! But this crowns all, and — Wignall !' He turned from them and addressed the butler, who had appeared in the doorway. 'You will see that neither Captain Bligh nor his son are admitted in future. Should they call, either of them, the ladies are not at home. If they wish to see me privately that is another matter. You understand ? Very good ! See that my orders are observed.' He dismissed the man by a nod, and turned to his visitor with the air of a man who had done his duty and had no doubt about the propriety of his action. 'An unfortunate young man,' he said, 'and no doubt to be pitied. But we must draw a line — we must draw a line, for the sake of others and example. What you

will do about the Fencibles, I don't know, Wyke. That is your business, but——'

'I don't think I shall do anything !' Wyke replied rather shortly.

'Well, that's your business, as I say. Though I confess I should be glad to have them both out of the parish — they are no honour to us. As to the cottage, I don't know what I shall do. It is in Budgen's lease, and I have not full power, but I shall see him about it. In my position I have a duty to others, and I recognise it. Peggy ! Where are you going, my dear ?'

But Peggy, her curls quivering, had already reached the door, and only a murmur, conveying no meaning, reached the group about the hearth.

'Foolish child !' Augusta said, looking after her indulgently.

'She seems to have known him ?' Sir Albery suggested, his eyes lingering on the door.

'Who ? Young Bligh ?' the Rector replied comfortably. 'To be sure ! We all did after a fashion. But a disgrace, an official disgrace such as this, alters the matter — closes the door so to speak.' The phrase pleased him and he repeated it in the satisfied tone of one whose words were not wont to fall to the ground. 'His footing among us' — he warmed his coat-skirts as he stood with his back to the fire — 'if footing it could be called, was slight; and he has now forfeited the right to be considered as existing — as existing for us, I mean,' he amended, with a gesture which once for all eliminated the offender. 'In our position we must set an example. Augusta, my dear, you will be good enough not to know him in future, if you come across him in your walks.'

Augusta assented meekly.

'Sir Albery must judge for himself. He is his own master, though I venture to think that in his position, he, too, owes a duty to society.'

But Sir Albery refused to commit himself. 'I hardly know

the young man,' he said. 'But I am sorry for him. As for his father, I am more than sorry for him, poor beggar.'

The Rector shook his handsome Jove-like head. He was a very fine figure of a man. 'What that unfortunate' — he began portentously — 'that poor debased man must be feeling at this moment, I shrink, Wyke, from imagining! His sin has indeed come home to him. I am no Pharisee, as you know. If a gentleman can take his bottle, or even his two bottles, of the wine, that was mercifully given to cheer the heart of man, and can still remain the gentleman, Heaven forbid that I should cast a stone! But the manner! The manner is the man, as we said at Winchester, and Captain Bligh's manner — deplorable! Deplorable! Brandy, too, I fear, and no doubt smuggled. Well, I look round no corners, I am a man of the world, and we must take the world as we find it, and certainly the duties are high. But, speaking as a magistrate — deplorable!'

Wyke smiled. 'Well, there is plenty of the stuff about,' he said. 'I have even heard it whispered that the *Lively Peggy* has been known to bring in a tub or two, when she has brought back nothing better, rector.'

'I trust not! I hope not!' Dr. Portnal spoke a little warmly, for he had the credit of owning a comfortable stake in the Beremouth privateer. 'I do not think so ill of Budgen as that. No, really, no. Let us have charity, Wyke, charity.'

'Which covers a multitude of tubs!' Sir Albery rejoined slyly.

CHAPTER II

NEVY?' old Budgen roared, his face crimson with anger. 'Nevy, indeed! My nevy you may be, and more shame to me! But an idle, drunken dog you are! Not a stroke o' work ha' you done this two months, and the books in that state o' muddle I might put 'em in the fire, and no worse off! I wish that there wood was your coffin, I do! But I make an end of you! Off my place you go! Off you go, and I wish I may never see your ugly chaps again!'

Joe, standing out on the shingle, a picture of loutish gawkiness, rubbed one foot against another. 'You can't do it,' he drawled.

'Can't do it? You'll see if I can't do it! Come into my moulding-loft, or so much as put a foot on the slips, and I'll foot the slack of your breeches with my shoemaker! And that's my last word to you! My patience is wore out, and high time too. You be ended, my lad.'

'You daren't do it,' Joe growled, still sulkily defiant. But his uncle's attitude was so threatening that he retreated another pace or two from the shed, under the eaves of which Budgen stood declaiming.

'Daren't do it, you little, wimping, scrimping effigy!' Budgen shouted. He snatched up a heavy caulking mallet from a bench beside him. 'Why, you little threadpaper, for another word I'd duck you in the mast-pond! And by Elijah I will! Ben! Eb'nezer! Give this chap a taste o' sea-water! Souse him well, souse him overhead — d'you hear? I've done with the scamp! Collar him and ——'

But Joe Fewster was only a lath of a man, and he knew himself to be no favourite with the men over whom he had exercised an idle and teasing authority. He backed away, still muttering dark threats of what he would do, and declaring in particular an intention of enlisting that very moment in His Majesty's forces stationed abroad. He repeated this more than once, and seemed to expect something to come of it. But as Budgen remained unshaken and only threatened to throw the mallet at him, Joe presently shambled away and, still cursing, took the steep path that, winding up the side of the Cove, led to the town and the Privateersman.

His uncle, the job done, wiped his forehead. 'Let him go,' he said to the grinning men. 'But, mark you, I've done with him. I've done with Joe! Never no more man o' mine! If he puts foot in this place do you put him out — put him out with the toe o' your boot, the lazy, drunken scamp! You've my 'thority! Or duck him if you like — 'twill do the swab no harm!'

Dabbing his heated face with a vast yellow handkerchief, a thing of luxury, of Lyons silk and spoil of war, Budge went back into what he vaingloriously called his moulding-loft. There he proposed to refresh himself with a treat that seldom failed to relieve his feelings — a leisurely gloat over the lines of his latest and dearest creation. The loft was a tall shed closed on three sides only, on the longest of which was depicted in chalk from keel to poop-rail and large as life, the *Lively Peggy*, Letter of Marque of Beremouth, Master, Ozias Copestake, at present absent on her cruising ground. Budgen's happiest moments were passed with that drawing before his eyes and the smell of wood-shavings and the tang of tar and seaweed in his nostrils. 'Budgen & Fewster' — Fewster, Joe's father, had lain in the churchyard these seven years — 'Ship and Boatbuilders,' was painted on a huge board above the open side of the shed that looked on the slips; for the actual building was done in the open. But of Budgen & Fewster's skill as shipbuilders the *Lively Peggy* was the rare

and fine flower. There had been an earlier brig, the *Pride of Beremouth*; but she had met with misfortune, and alas! was now in French hands and 'ravaging,' it was rumoured, out of Cherbourg. Yearly Budgen turned out a fishing-smack or two or a small coaster, and a half a dozen quay-punts. But for the main part Budgen's did not rise above boats — good boats, and they had a good name for them.

On this occasion neither the contemplation of his darling's fine lines nor his favourite smell of tar and shavings availed to give Budgen the relief he craved. He had turned a deaf ear to Joe's threat that he would enlist. But he had heard it, and it worried him. Joe was as worthless a fellow as walked on shoe-leather. He spent at the Privatcersman the money that he did not earn, and had it been only his ugly carcass that was at stake he might have gone to the West Indies and, as far as Budgen was concerned, might have fed the land-crabs, and welcome. But unluckily there were other and graver issues depending on him. Joe's life had a special value for Budgen, as Joe well knew; and this fact, true at all times, was especially true at this moment. It was so true that the mere thought of risking that life and all that it stood for gave Budgen the goose-flesh, boldly as he had carried it off in Joe's presence. For the capture of the *Pride of Beremouth* had dealt the boat-builder a shrewd blow, although he had been very far from bearing the whole of the loss. A second blow — and his prophetic eye discerned a possible and a heavy one — would find him ill-prepared to meet it; while, as for Joe's death, that spelt ruin, sudden and complete, and he dared not even think of it.

'And the Reverend,' he ruminated with a gloomy face, 'he's as hard as stone. No mercy to be expected from him, d — n his pompous Lord-a-Mighty airs! There's some might believe in him, but not Isaac Budgen. No,' he reflected, with a long and darkling look at the *Lively Peggy's* lines, 'half of you is his, and the better half, too! And if Copestake bring in an anker or two of rum to cover costs

when no better's to be had, it's "Understand, this must not occur again, Budgen!" says he, but he takes good care to share in the reckoning! Ay, right good care his reverence takes of that!

He was upset for the day, and unfortunately it was his day for checking the monthly accounts, while all the material that Joe had left him consisted of scraps of dirty paper and of some illegible chalk-marks on the side of the shed. The sight of this muddle flustered the boat-builder afresh. He was no scholar; and while he bothered himself about it, with that threat of Joe's ever at the back of his mind, it seemed to him that the men took advantage of him and worked lazily. The business was his life and soul, his heart was in it, and in the money that seemed to be oozing away from it. But of late it had brought him more pleasure than profit, and it would bear no further burden, he knew.

Bound up with it in his affections and hardly less loved was his pleasant house in the nook of the Cove, with its white-harled, fuchsia-clad walls and its green door with the smart brass knocker — the knocker a naked lady, the spoil of war, as was much of the furniture inside. But this too failed to afford him relief or pleasure at this moment. He had a vision in which he saw house and land and the loft and his half-dozen cottages, sprinkled up and down the steep sides of the Cove — in which he saw them all at stake and taken from him! And with them the piles of seasoning timber that he eyed lovingly morning and night, and the masts pickling in their pond, and the tubs of fragrant tar! Of what use would these be if he lost the Cove and all that went with it — all that made him the man he was.

'D — n that Joe!' he whispered viciously, as he wiped the beads from his forehead. 'D — n him! D — n him!' And the sun that shone into the warm cove, the sunshine and the soft Devon air and the sea-tang all lost their pleasantness and savour. He moved restlessly to the slips and stared up at the steep bluff, crowned by the church tower and

climbed by a narrow path so steep that in one place it became a staircase. But the bluff only led his thoughts to the Rectory that stood on it, and he spat in his disgust, and went in again to his muddled accounts.

Presently Ebenezer put his head into the shed. 'There's the Lieutenant a-coming down, master,' he said, 'if you've a mind to spy him.'

But Budgen was grumpy. 'I s'pose he looks the same as other days,' he growled. He did not move.

A moment later Ebenezer looked in again. 'I b'lieve he's coming here,' he said.

'Well, let him come!' Budgen snarled. So when a moment later Bligh stepped into the shed he found the boat-builder with his horn-rimmed glasses thrust high on his forehead, still digging hopelessly into his pile of papers. Budgen worked at an old rickety desk in one of the closed corners; and to show his indifference he did not glance up, though he heard his visitor's step. The Lieutenant, as he had supposed, looked much as usual, though a sharp eye might have found him a shade harder and gloomier for his late experience. He came a little way in, and after glancing about him addressed Budgen with the air of a man ready to take offence, but restraining himself for the time. 'Can I have a word with you?' he asked.

'Well,' the boat-builder replied surlily, 'I be busy! But I've ears. I suppose you can say what you've a mind to say, Lieutenant.'

'Drop that,' Bligh replied sharply. 'I'm not that any more — as you know.'

'As you will. Have it your own way. What is it?'

'Can you give me work?'

Budgen was so much surprised by the question that a good part of his ill-humour dropped from him. 'Work! What, afore the mast?' he exclaimed. 'Lord bless you, man, it's impossible! See you handle a mallet? Why, the men

would do no mortal work hour's end to hour's end, but just gape at you !'

'I hear you've got rid of Fewster. I met him up above.'

'And if I have ? What then ?'

'What Fewster could do I could do.'

Budgen stared, but his attention was caught. He left his desk and came forward. 'Well, you've lost no time, Lieutenant,' he said, with admiration. 'I will say that.'

'No,' Bligh replied drily. 'If I could eat to-morrow for to-day, there'd be no hurry. As it is I've got to eat to-day, Budgen.'

'What do you count to do, man ?'

'What Joe did — but I'd do it. Keep your accounts,' he cast a glance at the desk, 'and overlook the men when you are not here. And tally stores in and out.'

'Umph ! Well, you'd be honest, I do believe. There is that,' the boat-builder allowed, calculation in his eyes. 'I will say, there's that.'

Bligh reddened, but he did not answer. He saw that the other's mind was working in the desired direction. But presently, seeing that Budgen still pondered and that a word might turn the scale, 'And when the *Lively Peggy* comes in,' he suggested, 'I'd take her out if it suited you.'

Budgen rubbed his chin thoughtfully. 'To be sure,' he agreed. 'To be sure. You'd do for that, or you'd ought to. And Ozias ——' he shook his head doubtfully. 'Well, I'm not saying as to that, one way or the other, but there might be a berth. I dunno till she comes to her moorings. I can't say fairer than that one way or the other. Do you come back then, and I don't say we'll not talk about it.'

'No, that won't do,' Bligh replied firmly. 'Take me on now, pay me a pound a week, and when afloat whatever Ozias gets or near it, and I'm your man. And you'll get a cheap bargain, Budgen. You know that.'

'A pound a week ?' Budgen shook his head. He came

forward and joined Bligh near the entrance of the shed — perhaps to gain time. 'I see you've your flag flying,' he said, pointing upwards.

Bligh started. 'Flag?' he queried. 'What ——'

"Well, we call that table-cloth o' yours on the gate there your flag. It's there pretty often, I notice. Seemin'ly you do a deal o' washing up there.'

Bligh looked put out. 'I see,' he muttered. 'I didn't understand.'

Budgen shook his head. 'A pound a week?' he repeated. 'It's a mint o' money that. I'd not thought of taking any one in Joe's place; no more use he was than that there rag on the gate. I can do as well without him as with him. Still' — he looked cunningly away — 'suppose we say six half-crowns a week, and Ozias's pay when afloat.'

Bligh frowned, but after a moment's thought, 'Very well, he said curtly. 'I'll come to-morrow morning. No!' he checked himself abruptly. 'To-morrow's Saturday. I'll begin on Monday, if that will suit you?'

Budgen nodded. Inwardly he was pluming himself on a good bargain. 'Week's notice,' he said crustily. He had gained his point.

'Very well. You'll have no call to give it.'

Bligh was turning away when, 'Hallo!' Budgen exclaimed, 'here's Missie! Second time this week, too, I b'lieve.'

Bligh looked round, and saw Peggy Portnal. She was making her way delicately over the rough shingle. He did not pause. 'Very well, that's settled, then,' he said. 'Good-day.'

He moved away, lifting his hat as he met the girl. She bowed, a little colour in her cheeks, and he went by her and took the path that climbed the face of the headland and led to the town.

Peggy came on to Budgen. 'I think I dropped a glove here — on Tuesday,' she said. She seemed to be a little out

of breath with her rough walk over the stones. 'Have any of your men found it, do you think?'

'It's in my desk,' Budgen said, speaking politely for him; and he went and fetched the glove from the corner. 'It's well we are honest, Missie, for it's the second time you've dropped it here.'

'Shiftless folk women are, aren't they?' she answered, rewarding him with a bewitching smile. 'Thank you for saving it, Budgen.'

'It came off your namesake, I guess,' he said, handling the glove with knowledge. It was a dainty French thing.

'I've no doubt it did. When will she be in, Budgen?'

But Budgen shook his head. 'What you don't know you can't tell,' he said pithily. 'There's things as easy dropped as your glove, Miss Peggy, and no picking of them up again.'

The girl pouted. 'I should have thought that I might be trusted!' she said. 'My own boat, Budgen!'

'Ay, ay, Missie, in a manner o' speaking, your boat. But other men's lives. Little tongues carry far, and least said is soonest mended. What with the smugglers and others news passes too easy—it's across in a night, and you none the wiser. But never you fret, I'll send you word when she's sighted, Miss. And failing all you'll hear the bells soon enough if so be as she brings in a prize, as I hope.'

'She's not been lucky lately, has she?'

Budgen's face fell. 'No, Miss, you never said a truer word,' he replied. 'All going out and nothing coming in, that's what it's been. But no fault o' Copestake's, I will say that. He shivers and shakes, does Ozias, worse than the luff o' the sail going about. But he's good stuff, is Ozias—wonderful good stuff. Staunch as the best bit of oak in my yard, though he do complain amazing. Amazing, he complains, does Ozias.'

CHAPTER III

THE crown of the headland that drops down on one side to the scrambling street of Beremouth, and on the other falls by a steep and gorse-clad slope to Budgen's Cove, is divided into two halves. On the eastern sits, like a couchant lion, the old Norman church with its squat tower and its spacious graveyard, the latter bounded seawards by a low wall, and within the wall by a walk that owing to its open outlook is a favourite lounge of the Beremouth folk. They climb up to it and walk on it on summer evenings. The western half is occupied by the Rectory, its gardens and out-buildings. These are jealously walled-in, and are accessible only through a frowning portal almost as old as the church.

Between the Rectory and the graveyard, and so bisecting the summit of the hill, a cobbled lane runs past the Rectory entrance. It ends abruptly in an arch of graceful, fretted stonework said by tradition to be the window of an old chapel, of which some fragments of the side-walls survive. Ivy has grown over the lower part, and at some period a stone bench has been set there, so placed that a man may sit at his ease and with his elbow on the sill of the window look down on the shifting sea. The arch is in a line with the low churchyard wall, but the seat though open to the lane is shielded from observation on the churchyard side by the ivied side-wall. The place is public, but it abuts on the Rectory, the Rectory gardener clips the ivy and from time to time sweeps out the floor, and in Dr. Portnal's day at any rate few were venturesome enough to encroach on it, or to sit there in the daylight.

For proudly as the Rectory looks down on the little seaport huddled beneath its windows it does not look down upon it with one-half of the aloofness or the stately dignity with which the Rector of that day regarded his flock. The Reverend Augustus Portnal, D.D., Rector of Beremouth with Chiddingfold, Vicar of Ipe and Downton, and Rural Dean of Ipe — and on his lay side Chairman of the Beremouth Justices and of the Quorum — was in his own estimation, and indeed in the estimation of others, no common person. He was a power not only in Beremouth but beyond it. Accustomed through a long series of years to have his own way and to see that he had it, he had learned how to secure it at the least cost and with the least exertion. He was not a violent man; he plumed himself on obtaining his ends by a gentle force never relaxed, as of a soft and irresistible pillow that, as some had learned to their cost, drove an opponent to the edge before he awoke to his danger. Suave and bland, he preached this gospel to others, and among his fellows he had a name for it. If a son was inclined to be wild, or a brother magistrate had tripped, it was to the Rector that men turned for advice, and he gave it *ex cathedra* — and it was good advice. Hence, gifted with a strong will, he had come to feel no doubt of himself and some little contempt for others. Nor had it ever occurred to him that tried in his own case the policy for which he was famed might fail him and the methods which he preached to others prove to be beyond his strength — or his patience.

He was not a bad man, but success had somewhat corroded him. In the imposition, the daily imposition of a will that had not for many a year been seriously challenged he had come to believe in himself to a high and perhaps a dangerous degree, and in that belief his neighbours' appreciation had encouraged him. Handsome, clever, and worldly, he was as much esteemed by the equals who shared his opinions and valued his advice as he was respected by those below him, who by turns admired and hated him.

His bland address blinded many to his arbitrary quality, but it could not blind those who shared his home and his daily life. Augusta, his favourite child — Augusta of the gracious smile, as she was dubbed by more than one jealous mother — understood him, and, perhaps because she had received a double portion of his spirit, her sister's as well as her own, played up to him both finely and sincerely. She partook of his prejudices and found in his suave force something akin to herself. But with his younger daughter it was otherwise. From whatever source Peggy had derived her recalcitrance, she had not only failed to accept her father's measures of value, but she had come to feel, as she grew older, a waxing temptation to rebel against the authority that enforced them. To do so was difficult, for that against which she was moved to revolt was not a tyranny harshly and unpleasantly displayed. It was rather, as has been said, a slow pressure which her wilful temperament and generous instincts inspired her to resist, even while she felt it to be a force with which it was almost impossible to cope.

There had been times, and many times, when the girl had blamed herself for the feeling; when she had set down her lack of sympathy with her father and sister to the absence of some amiable quality in herself. But as there are bodies that instinctively reject certain drugs, and as a slow compression begets a steady but increasing reaction, so had Peggy's discontent and the temptation to rebel grown with time; until reinforced of late by a more powerful instinct, they had brought the girl to a point at which in her wisdom or folly she was ready to go all lengths.

For whatever she had not inherited from her father she had derived from him a strong will; so that, with a motive sufficiently potent, and the knowledge that what she desired was forbidden, an explosion had come to be but a matter of time.

Love, pity, and a generous indignation, these, choked down and smouldering, had a little before this supplied the

motive; circumstances had applied the match, and the flame was ready to burst forth.

It was in such a temper that a few days after Sir Albery's visit Peggy left the house before eight one morning — a fair April morning, fresh and sunny. She had only to go some thirty yards to reach the arch that on that spring day framed so fair a view of the sea; and surely, it might be argued, to visit it at that innocent hour could import no harm. But seated on the stone bench below the arch, and sombrely brooding on the bright shimmering surface and the play of light and shadow below him, was a young man.

He did not turn at the girl's approach nor look at her. Nor did he move. Yet he must have heard her coming, for he spoke. 'Why did you summon me?' he asked, and his tone could hardly have been less gracious. 'Why have you come? It is madness, madness, Peggy!' he continued, his voice harsh with pain. 'You might as well cast yourself over this cliff as come to meet such an outcast as I am! It is folly!'

'I do not think so,' she said. She laid her hand on his shoulder as she spoke.

He did not shake off the hand, but he moved impatiently under its pressure. 'You are disgracing yourself!' he cried vehemently and almost savagely. 'I say it again, you might as well throw yourself down from this window as come to meet such as I!'

'I do not think so,' she repeated in the same steadfast tone, though there were tears in her eyes.

'You come only out of pity!' He seemed to be minded to say everything that might hurt her.

But that she would not bear. 'No!' she said. 'No! You know — you know, Charles, that that is not true!'

'A one-armed cripple!' he continued bitterly. 'A disgraced, drunken, broken man! A penniless wreck dependent on his father for the bread he eats and the roof that covers him! You know, you know that you should not

have summoned me ! You should not have come. You should not have seen me again. It was bad enough and mad enough before, hopeless and impossible. But now there is not a serving wench in Beremouth who would be seen with me in the street, who would not be ashamed to walk with me where she could be seen, who would not shun me like the plague ! And you ——’

‘I will be seen with you,’ she cried, lifting her head proudly. ‘And I will walk with you. I will go with you whenever you say the word, Charles.’

‘And be ruined !’

‘Then I will be ruined with you.’

He broke down at that. ‘Poor, poor girl !’ he said. He did not turn, but he put his hand behind him and found her hand.

‘No, I am rich,’ she said. ‘Rich in your love.’

‘And I ?’ His tone grew hard again. ‘What am I ? Have you thought of that ? If I suffer this, what shall I be ? What shall I seem to be when we are discovered, as one of these days we must be discovered ? The meanest, the most selfish, the most despicable of wretches ! My own father will cry shame on me, ay, even my poor, patient father, who has never uttered one word of reproach or of anger, who has stood by my side and shared my disgrace, though I have robbed him of the last hope of an unhappy life ! But you — if I let you do this, if I drag you down with me, even he will call me scoundrel, and cast me off !’

‘He shall not cast me off !’ she cried, tears in her voice.

That penetrated at last the hard crust that had formed about his heart, and ‘Oh, Peggy, Peggy !’ he sobbed, and he broke down, hiding his face on the shoulder that rested on the ledge of the window, while his whole frame heaved. ‘You are high as heaven above me, and shall I drag you down to hell ? Shall I disgrace, and beggar you ? Never, never, my dear ! It is done, but it can still be undone ! We must part to-day, and you must never, never come here again. It

was all madness — sheer, utter madness before. Your father would never have consented — never have permitted it. And now to love me is to lower yourself to the very dust, to tie yourself to a banned, broken, hopeless man !’

‘But my man,’ the girl said, the tears running down her cheeks. ‘My man, now and always !’

‘To a drunkard !’ he repeated with passion.

‘No !’ she protested, her voice rising. ‘No, Charles, not that ! For that will not happen again. You will promise me that, I know ? You will do that for me, and I ask no more. You will promise me that ?’

‘Promise ?’ he said bitterly. ‘What is the worth of my promise ?’

‘It was but once,’ she said. ‘And you have paid for it, oh, so sorely you have paid for it ! And it is done and done with. Whatever we decide to do, you will promise me that ? I sent for you, I came to you for that ; and to tell you that my love is unaltered and unalterable, Charles. I will not leave you until you give me your word, though I stay here until they find me with you ! I have no care, no anxiety, no fear but that.’

He did not answer her. He sat where she had found him, looking over the sea, in the same hopeless attitude in which she had discovered him. He had not once turned to look at her, and she had stood through all with her patient hand on his shoulder. At last, ‘You know what my father is ?’ he muttered.

‘I know, dear,’ she said, and her voice betrayed her distress. ‘I know.’

‘It is in the blood.’

‘If you give way to it. But you are young, Charles, while he is old.’

‘And you — my God, you would take my word ?’

‘If you love me.’

‘But if I cannot ? Oh, Peggy,’ he cried, ‘if I cannot trust myself !’

'I have more faith in you,' she said firmly.

And still he tried to evade her. 'But it is all madness!' he said. 'Madness! It is all useless, hopeless, futile! We can never be anything to one another.'

'I will come to you when you call me.'

'But if I — oh, my dear!' It was the cry of one in anguish. 'How can I! How can I call you? How can I be so wicked, so selfish?'

'Then I will wait,' she replied, 'if it be ten years. I look to wait. And see, dear,' she continued, 'I ask but this one thing. You cannot refuse to give it me. You cannot if you love me.'

He groaned. 'If I promise and do not keep it?' he muttered.

'I trust you.'

'But if I do not?'

'Then — then, I am of all women the most unhappy! But you will keep it.'

He had no confidence in himself, and he still hesitated. 'Nothing can come of it,' he said.

'Everything can come of it,' she persisted. 'Everything, if you give me your word and keep it.'

He was silent, wrestling with himself. But at last and reluctantly he promised her.

'Now,' she said, and her face as she stood over him was radiant, 'I care not what comes. Now nothing matters — nothing! I am as iron that the needle turns from. They may prick and prick, but I shall feel nothing. I can bear all now, Charles. We may have to suffer and to wait, but —'

'But Wyke may not wait,' he suggested. He had been sorely tried, and he would not hope. Though he loved — and never had he loved her as he loved her at this moment — he could not refrain from tormenting her — and himself.

'You need have no fear of ^{that}!' She answered for it

hardily. 'I will see to that!' For she was his opposite, she feared nothing. 'No Sir Albery, and no twenty Sir Alberys, shall rob me of my love, or come between thee and me.'

He was melted — who could resist her? And presently in faltering accents, for there was one thing which she did fear — that he might have made up his mind to leave Bere-mouth — she questioned him about his plans, and what he was going to do. When he told her of the work that he had found at Budgen's, poor and humble as it was and as she knew it to be, she laughed and clapped her hands. 'Oh, I am glad!' she said. 'I feared that you would go away. I would have borne even that, and waited and hoped. But this — oh, I am thankful. It is noble of you!'

'I could not leave my father,' he said, 'I owe him too much. You do not know him. You have heard only ill of him. But he is the best, the most loving, the most patient of men. I should be a poor creature if I left him to save myself shame, to escape that which I read in every man's face and every woman's eye.'

'But never in mine!' she declared, her face alight. 'Never! Never! I honour you for it!'

'It is well —' he could not even now expel the bitterness from his tone — 'that there is anything you can honour me for!'

'Is there not this?' She pressed his empty sleeve. 'And some day you will be righted, you will be reinstated! I know it, I feel sure of it. And I shall live to see it and be proud — proud of you.'

'If you are looking forward to that ——'

'It is nothing to me! Nothing. But for the world's sake! And it will come, be sure.'

'In the next world,' he said sadly. He was without hope, and he could not spare her. 'Anyway, dear, we must not meet after this.'

'Until there is a change,' she agreed. She sighed. 'If

there is, if anything happens, and I must see you, I will loop the window-curtain. Yesterday I was afraid that you might not see it.'

'An honest man would not have. But, God forgive me, I have only you and my father, and I had to see you once if it was but to say good-bye and — and God bless you, dear !'

'I knew you would come. I saw your flag when I went to the Cove. And now I must go. But I go happy, for I have your word, Charles.'

He turned at that, and at last and for a long moment, while she held his hand in both of hers, they looked into one another's eyes, anguish in his, courage and a loving assurance in hers. He pressed her hand, and with a sob that she could not restrain she tore herself away. She sped to the Rectory archway, she turned an instant and flung him a passionate look, a last gesture, and she was gone.

Two minutes later — for young as she was Peggy had all a woman's power of masking her thoughts under a fair show — she was again a part of the life of the house. When the bell for prayers rang and she glided into the dining-room by one door as the servants filed in through the other, her lowered eyes and composed air would have deceived the closest observer. They seemed a fitting tribute, and no more, to the rite that called the household together.

CHAPTER IV

BUT if Peggy could mask her feelings she was not the only one at the Rectory who had feelings, and could hide them. When, some six months before this, Sir Albery Wyke's curricule had begun to be noticed, waiting in the Rectory Lane, it had been to Augusta's charms that his visits were attributed. She was the elder sister and the beauty, no assembly in the country was perfect without her, and excellent match as Sir Albery was, the turn of Augusta's swan-like neck, her regular features and the sweetness of her smile were held to deserve no less. The thing had gone so far that more than one — Charlotte Bicester among others — had offered their sly congratulations. When Sir Albery, therefore, had first hung in the wind, and then had gone on the other tack, in obvious pursuit of Peggy, Augusta had felt the unfairness of the shift. Her pride had smarted; and though, so far, Wyke had not spoken, though the handkerchief remained in his hand, the elder sister doubted not that it would be cast, and that, restive and wayward as Peggy was, it would be taken up. Her father, she knew, would see to that.

Even so, and let it stand to her credit, Augusta's smile did not vary, nor her placidity fail. But as she sat at her tambour frame where the light of the three tall windows of the drawing-room fell on her matchless complexion and her finely turned arm, she meditated long on the position. It was not so much of the fickle lover that she thought, as of her sister, and her sister's private concerns. For Peggy might be adroit, she might hoodwink her father and blind the servants —

though what they knew was less certain — but if she fancied that she could loop the curtain of one of the windows that looked on the sea, and repeat the manœuvre whenever it suited her, without awakening a sister's suspicions, she was mistaken. Augusta had marked the act, and found occasion to unloop the curtain. The event had justified her stratagem; she had seen Peggy move carelessly to the curtain and loop it anew. Thereafter Augusta had watched and she had seen other things; among them a young man who passed often upon the water between the Cove and Beremouth, and frequently looked up at the tall headland and the windows that crowned it. She had drawn her conclusions.

As her shapely hand rose and fell, and she passed the needle through the strained linen, in the stillness of the room that looked on sky and sea, Augusta pondered how she might turn the thing to advantage. She knew that one word to her father would bring Peggy's cloud-castle toppling about her ears. But she discerned with equal clearness that that would not advance her own interests; she knew her father's methods, and she was sure that exposed to the pressure that he would exert, a pressure as irresistible as it was gentle, the most wilful Peggy would give way.

She gave much thought to the matter, and sought with patience an answer to the riddle. At length, and by chance, her mind fastened on the allusion to the Cottage, that, leased to the Blighs by Budgen, was the Rector's property. Later she heard that Budgen had taken the younger Bligh into his service; and on that she began to see her way. Not clearly, nor very certainly yet; it was a delicate operation that she contemplated, and much would depend upon whether her judgment of Peggy's character proved correct. Still she had now a line that she could follow, if the opportunity presented itself.

On a fine Sunday, a fortnight or so after Charles Bligh's disgrace became known, she fancied that her time had come. The long morning service at an end, the congregation, instead

of streaming away by twos and threes down the winding road that led to the town, paused in chattering groups about the west door to await the exit of the Beremouth Fencibles, a troop that Wyke had raised at his own expense. The corps had attended the service, and to see them, gay in their red facings, drawn up, put through the firelock exercise and dismissed, was a show that sunshine and Sunday leisure made attractive. Nor was it the commonalty only whom the sight detained, or who viewed with sympathy or apathy, as the case might be, the old Captain limping to and fro, as he saw to the dressing of the line. The Rectory party lingered, waiting for Sir Albery, and from their station, a little apart by the low wall of the Rectory Lane, they too eyed the shabby half-pay officer and shaped their various opinions of him.

'It is really disgraceful !' Augusta remarked — she spoke with graceful languor. 'Sir Albery should be rid of him !'

Charlotte Bicester took her up — Charlotte whose bluntness and oddity were the torment of her mother's life. 'What ? That dear old man ?' she exclaimed. 'Why, I love him ! He's so neat ! He's the only soldier among them ! Do look at Dunch the barber,' she continued with amusement, 'treading on the tails of his own coat ! And Sir Albery choking in his stock, poor dear, and as stiff as the men are slouching ! Why, I think the old man's a picture. What has he done, Augusta ?'

'Quite enough to make you love him, my dear,' Augusta replied, 'if you love lame ducks ! But it's not what he has done, but what his son has done — if you ask me !'

'What ? The sins of the children on the fathers ?' Charlotte replied smartly. 'But surely that's bad scripture. And what has the son done ? Got drunk once too often ? Why, if that is all, and it is all I've heard ——'

'On duty ?'

'Well, he's paid for it, poor devil ! Or so I hear.'

Lady Bicester raised her hands in horror. 'Charlotte !' she cried. 'My dear, what things you say !'

Charlotte winked at Peggy. 'I learn them from the gentlemen, mother,' she said, 'when they come up a little free from the Rector's third bottle! I don't freeze them as Augusta does, and I see them as they are. But gentlemen will be gentlemen, my lady says, and we must make allowances for them.'

'Do you call him a gentleman?' Augusta asked.

But that, as her sister expected, was more than Peggy, who so far had been silent, could bear. 'At any rate he has seen service!' she said.

'Bravo, Peggy!' Charlotte cried. 'What do you say, Mr. Fareham?'

But Mr. Fareham's younger son whose parents would willingly have taken Charlotte into the family — for, though plain, she had money — had fallen instead into Augusta's toils. 'I think a man should carry his liquor like a gentleman,' he said.

'Then he'd carry a lot!' Charlotte retorted. 'But there, it's over, and they are dismissing. And do look at Dunch! I'm sure that man will fall over his coat-tails before he's done!' Then, 'Peggy! Where are you going?' she cried.

But Peggy was out of hearing. She had not come with any intention of behaving ill. On the contrary she had formed all sorts of wise and prudent resolutions. But her temper and her feelings proved, as often before, too much for her, and already she was half-way across the churchyard, from which the Fencibles, mingling with the crowd, were beginning to flow away. Sir Albery saw her moving in his direction and thought that she was coming to him, and the flattered man greeted her approach with a fatuous smile. But Peggy passed by him without a glance. She greeted the old Captain, holding out her hand to him.

'Now, isn't that like Peggy!' Augusta murmured. She shrugged her handsome shoulders. 'Silly, silly girl!'

But Charlotte clapped her hands. 'Bravo, Peggy!' she repeated.

Dr. Portnal had left the vestry a moment before and was approaching the group. He overheard her words. 'Why silly?' he asked, with stately geniality. 'And why Bravo? What is it, my dear, that has evoked such opposite sentiments?'

'Only a little quixotry — on Peggy's part,' Augusta replied, her object apparently to pass the matter by. 'I think we may go now. The show is over.'

But she did not move at once. She paused long enough to allow the Rector's eyes to alight on Peggy, who was in the act of parting from the Captain. 'I see,' Dr. Portnal said, 'I see. But there' — he shrugged his shoulders indulgently — 'old heads do not grow on young shoulders.'

'They'd look very odd if they did!' the irrepressible Charlotte retorted.

'To be sure! To be sure, my dear. You are right. However, let us be going.' But as they turned in a body to cross the lane that divided them from the Rectory he fell back and joined Wyke. 'Peggy is impulsive,' he said good-humouredly. 'A good girl, but she acts before she thinks.'

'But she acts!' Wyke answered warmly. 'And upon my soul I honour her for it. I had a word with the old man before the service, and he's cast down, terribly cast down, poor chap. He feels this blow, and feels, I think, that it is his fault. It has gone deep with him.'

But the Rector could not go as far as that. 'It ought to,' he said drily. 'It ought to, my friend.'

'Well, maybe you are right. But I think as Miss Peggy does, and I honour her for it, and — and in fact,' Wyke continued, swept away by his enthusiasm, 'I can't be silent any longer, Rector, I want to — to speak to you about her.' And with an ingenuous blush dyeing his candid face he drew his companion a few steps down the lane, until they reached and stood under the very open arch, looking down on the sparkling sea, which had seen other things happen. There, with his hand resting on the sill on which Bligh had leant

while he listened to Peggy's pleading, Wyke poured out the hopes that the other was well prepared to hear. For two minutes they talked, the young man telling the old, old tale that came so new from his heart. By and by the elder man wrung his hand.

'God bless you, my boy !' he said. 'God bless you ! You have made me very happy. There is nothing that I could wish for my girl beyond this — and I shall keep her near me and I am thankful for that. I see the fairest prospect of happiness for you both, and nothing on my part, you may be sure, shall be wanting to fulfil your hopes. But Peggy is young, and I think you will be wise to let me prepare her. She is young, and you know the old adage — "they flee, and fleeing look behind !" Ha ! Ha ! Yes, you had better let me drop a word to her and sound her. But I have no doubt, no doubt at all, my dear fellow, that all will turn out as you wish.'

Not without reluctance and not without a little opposition Wyke agreed, and the two, after another word or two, went into the house. The upshot was that later in the afternoon the Rector looked into the drawing-room. He found Augusta alone, and with his hand on the door he asked her where her sister was.

Augusta read his face, and knew in a moment what had happened. 'Has Sir Albergy spoken ?' she asked, with a smile.

'He has, my dear. And I am not surprised. I have seen it coming for some time.'

'Of course. But ——' Augusta paused on the word. She looked thoughtfully at her father.

'Well ?' The Rector did not understand. 'What is it, my dear ?'

'Well, I think,' Augusta said, choosing her words, her tone a little doubtful, 'I think I should not speak to her at once, sir — though you know best, no doubt.'

The Rector closed the door. He was an arbitrary man

but he was no fool and he had a high opinion of his elder daughter's judgment. 'Why?' he asked. 'Why do you think so?'

And still Augusta hesitated. 'Well, sir,' she said reluctantly, 'if you ask me, I am afraid that — that there is a little prepossession on her side — at present.'

'Prepossession!' The Rector stared. 'Prepossession? What on earth do you mean, Augusta?'

'I am afraid, sir, there is something,' she replied in a serious tone. 'Peggy is young and thoughtless — you know, sir, what she is, and I fear that she has let herself see a little too much of — of young Bligh, to be plain, sir.'

'Young Bligh!' the Rector ejaculated, his eyes almost starting from his head. And for a moment his anger fell on Augusta. 'Impossible! Impossible!' he cried. 'You must be dreaming, girl. Young Bligh! A daughter of mine see too much of — I don't understand you. You cannot be thinking of what you are saying, Augusta!'

But Augusta was firm. 'I fear I am right, sir,' she replied gravely. 'I have said nothing to you, for I hoped that it would pass off — and that he would leave. Perhaps I was wrong to — to be silent. No doubt I was wrong. But I am afraid, I am afraid — that there have been meetings, sir.'

'And you never told me!' The Rector's brow was very black now. He glowered at Augusta as if she were the one in fault, and any other than Augusta would have trembled before his wrath.

But Augusta knew where she stood. 'I hoped that it would pass off, sir,' she pleaded meekly. 'I see that I was wrong.'

'You were wrong, very wrong!' he said. He strode across the room and returned, his step heavy. 'Very wrong! I am appalled, appalled by what you tell me — if indeed you are not mistaken. Bligh? But I cannot believe it! I cannot believe it! How can such a state of things have come

about?' He was horror-struck; amazement and wrath battled in him with incredulity. 'How, girl? Explain yourself!'

'Indeed, sir, I hardly know,' Augusta pleaded penitently. 'I have found it hard to believe it myself. But Peggy — you know, sir, what she is! She is not like other people.'

'Like! She is like no decent people if this be true! I never heard of such a thing! Never! But if she has lost her senses, by heaven, I have not! And I shall put an end to it, and an instant end to it — this very hour! Go, Augusta, go to her this moment, and send her to me. Send her to me at once, and I will tell her what I think of her! She shall not disgrace herself under my roof! Bligh? Heaven above us! That scamp, that reprobate, that sot!'

Augusta rose, knowing well that the critical moment had come, and that to play her part efficiently, though she had more than once rehearsed it in her thoughts, would need all her wits.

She moved towards the door, but mid-way she paused. She looked at the Rector, and her face expressed just such a measure of doubt as suggested inquiry and invited a question. 'I think, sir,' she said very seriously, 'there may be a better way of dealing with this — this folly, if you will forgive me for saying so.'

'Folly?' he retorted in his anger. 'Call it madness! Madness! Disgraceful madness! No, the thing must be stamped out at once! At once!'

'Still —'

She broke off, but she looked at him with so much meaning in her face that, angry as he was, the Rector hesitated. He frowned. At length, 'Well? Well, girl, what is it you wish to say?'

She knew then that she had won, but she only threw more humility into her voice. 'It is this, sir. I think it may perhaps be wiser — to begin at the other end.'

He stared. 'At the other end? What do you mean?'

'I think, sir, I should get rid of him — before I spoke to Peggy. She is — I am afraid that she is very wilful. And opposition may not have the effect we desire, sir. But with him gone ——'

'With him — ah !' There was a new note in his voice.

'With him gone,' Augusta explained, 'I think the thing would die away quietly. He is working at Budgen's, or so I am told. And a word to Budgen ——' Augusta paused to let the hint sink in. 'Then I remember,' she continued, 'that you said something about the Cottage, sir ? Something might be done about that, might it not ? And — and with them both gone' — Augusta spoke on slowly, giving him time to reflect — 'that which you wish would come about naturally, and without friction. The fancy would die away and no one be the wiser.'

The Rector pondered. He saw that in his anger he had lost sight of his habitual prudence. And women were clever in their own concerns. He was impressed.

'Peggy is impulsive, as you know, sir,' Augusta continued, seeing that all was going as she would have it. 'And if she is opposed she will think herself a martyr. Whereas, left to herself, the fancy will die away.'

'She deserves to be whipped !' he exclaimed, convinced, but unwilling to give way too quickly. 'Upon my soul it is incredible ! Are you serious, Augusta ? I cannot even now believe it. Are you sure of this, girl ?'

'I am afraid I am, sir,' Augusta replied with sorrowful decision.

'Good heavens ! Good heavens ! Well, I will think over it,' he said more quietly. 'I am too much shocked, I am too deeply shocked to think calmly now. A wretched drink-sodden man working at Budgen's ! That low, disgraceful, sottish scamp and a daughter of mine ! It's — it's incredible. But if I give way to you, you must have an eye on her. You must watch her, girl. If this be really as you say, she is not to be trusted.'

Augusta assured him that she would watch; adding that she was certain that there was no immediate danger. Even then he did not say that he would take the course that she suggested, but she knew him, and she was confident that he would. Despotism as he was, the plan consorted better with his usual methods than open and violent measures.

But the effort had been great, and when he had left her, and then only, Augusta breathed freely. She had succeeded — so far. It remained to be seen if her judgment of her sister's character was correct; if an attack on one whom she loved would drive Peggy to do that to which no harsh treatment and no pressure applied to herself would compel her.

CHAPTER V

DR. PORTNAL chose his time with his usual discretion, and the rattle of the hammers and the caulking-mallets had ceased for the day, when with a gait as measured and stately as the steepness of the path permitted, he made his way down to the Cove. He had considered how he would act. In the first heat of passion he had been inclined to re-open with Wyke the question of the elder Bligh's employment. But on mature thought he had discarded the notion. He saw that it might lead him further than was prudent. Wyke might refuse, or might press for reasons; and his reasons the Rector was not prepared to state. Budgen, on the other hand, was in his power, and though Dr. Portnal would have preferred to make a clean sweep of the pair, it was the young man whom he had to fear.

The face of the cliff, with its chequers of golden gorse and its sprinkling of white-harled cottages, was still warm with sunshine when he reached the shore at its foot. The slips and the shed and Budgen's creeper-clad homestead which stood some way back in the cleft of the Cove lay already in shadow. Peace brooded over the little bay, the cries of the gulls came softened by distance, the lapping of the wavelets on the strand whispered softly of evening and of rest from labour. A boat, putting in to the Beremouth jetty, was gliding past the bluff, the fall of the sails and the voices of the men marking rather than breaking the silence.

Absorbed in his purpose, the Rector paid little heed to these things, to the lapping of the waves, or the fall of the yard as it struck the deck. Such sounds were common-

place to him. But as he approached the shed his thoughts and the stillness were interrupted by a sound as unexpected as it was unwelcome — the sound of angry voices. He had chosen his hour with a view to finding Budgen alone, and he paused; and, though he had no wish to hear what was passing in the shed, he heard.

'Four pound a month? Why should I gi' you four pound a month?' It was Budgen's voice, raised in anger, that he heard. 'Or three pound, or one pound, you lazy, loafing, good-for-naught? Or a ha'penny for the matter o' that! Confound your impudence!'

'Well,' a sulky voice, that Dr. Portnal did not at once identify, replied, 'you know for what very well.'

'I know I'm a fool — a fool to ha' begun with it! Ever to ha' let such a vagabond as you cross my step! But I warn you, you be going too far! Two pound a month, and it be two pound too much, I'll 'llow you! And that's my last word, my lad!'

'I'll 'list, then!' the sulky voice rejoined. 'That's what I'll do! And that'll be the end of it.'

'Then 'list and be hanged to you!' the other replied. 'But it's talk, you fool! Talk! You've too much care o' your lazy carcass to 'list! And I be a fool to listen to you, and be diddled by you! But that's my last word. You can take your two pound, or go to the devil your own way. Not a penny more do you get o' mine!'

The Rector had heard enough, and he walked in upon them. He knew now who the second speaker was, and he bent a stormy brow on him as he entered. 'You'd far better let the press-gang take him, Budgen,' he said sternly. 'Far better!' And then, addressing the offender, 'You are a disgrace to the parish,' he said. 'A standing disgrace, Fewster! If the Justices had done their duty they would have sent you to sea long ago. Now begone, and keep out of my sight, or I shall remember your case at the next sittings. You are wrong, Budgen, very wrong,' he continued, as Joe, silenced

and crushed, crawled out of sight, 'to support your nephew in his bad courses. Stop supplies — stop supplies, man, and let him go to sea, or enlist if he chooses.'

But Budgen, harried by Joe and less confident of the wisdom of defying him than he would have it appear, was in a more churlish mood than usual — which was saying a good deal. He feared the Rector, but he detested him also. 'Ay !' he replied as rudely as he dared. 'But that might suit your reverence better than me.'

'Don't talk nonsense,' the Rector rejoined.

'Nonsense ? Depends from which side you look at it,' Budgen retorted. 'There's a lot too much hangs on him for me to send him drifting. And, saving your presence, a lot too much for you the other way round !'

'Ah ! You mean that he's the last life in your lease ?'

'That's it.' Budgen nodded gloomily. He had come forward to meet the Rector, and from where he stood his eye could travel over the things that made up his life, the things that he loved; his house and snug garden nestling under the cliff, the Cove, the slips, the smack he was slowly building — mere ribs as yet: a boat or two drawn above high-water mark, and below all these, and still washed by the tide, the blackened timbers, sodden and weed-grown, of a forsaken hulk. To him they were all dear, all familiar — familiar as the bluff that shut him off from Beremouth and from the troublesome world of cares and duns, or as the sea across which his craft came and went. Budgen did not put into words his love for the Cove and its surroundings, the green headland that met his gaze morning by morning, and the shimmering sea; but he did love them, and his grasp of them was hard and greedy, for he knew them to be ever in danger. 'That's where it is,' he repeated gloomily. 'He's my last life, as you well know, sir, and a lot hangs on him for me. Now this talk of peace,' he continued, glad perhaps to lead the talk another way. 'It would not suit you nor me, your reverence. Do you think there's aught in it ?' His

eyes bent on the Rector's face strove to read it. He had puzzled over his last newspaper, a stray copy a fortnight old, and had made little of it.

'We must not say that peace would not suit us,' the Rector replied more mildly. 'We must not put our interests before the common good, Budgen. God forbid! And why do you say that it would not suit us?'

The boat-builder spat contemptuously on the shingle. He knew what he was talking about now. 'The *Peggy* — what worth would she be — in a peace?' he asked. 'She's built for speed, not for cargo, and all the freight we could put in her hold wouldn't pay for fok'sle wages. Night they light the fires on that there bluff for a peace she's done! You may run her ashore on the rocks there for all the value she'd be! And what I'm asking is, is there aught in it, sir?'

The Rector shook his head. 'I am afraid I cannot say,' he replied. 'There is certainly talk of it, but there has been talk before. In any case a settlement will take time — many months I suspect. When do you look for her to come in, Budgen?'

The boat-builder raised his hat and rubbed his head. 'Well, she'll ha' been thirty days on her ground come to-morrow, all being well,' he said. 'And she's victualled for thirty days more. Prize or no prize, I reckon she'll be in this day month at latest, if so be no harm happen her. But if she's in luck she may come in any day, and the sooner the better!'

The Rector nodded. 'Yes,' he said. 'And I hope she may be in luck, for your sake, Budgen.'

'Ay, your reverence,' Budgen replied with a sardonic look. 'And your own.'

The Rector passed that by. 'I should be better satisfied if I had more faith in your skipper,' he said. 'Are you sure of Copestake, Budgen? I've my misgivings. A man who talks as he does, must discourage the men.'

Budgen grinned. 'If he talked the same afloat as ashore,

ay ! And if talk was what mattered, I'd allow he'd take the spunk out of a sucking Nelson, would Ozias, to hear him. But 't isn't talk that goes at sea, and, Lord bless you, Ozias with a linstock in his hand and Ozias at the Keppel Head, they're two men. To listen to him to home, he's the saddest old-woman Methody 'tween this and the Land's End. But the fok'sle hand that trusts to that when a bit of the right bunting's in sight — well, I reckon, your reverence, he'd never knew what hit him !

The Rector pursed up his lips. He only knew Ozias ashore and he was doubtful. 'Well,' he said, 'I hope it is as you say, Budgen. But he's not lucky.'

'No, he's not lucky. There's no gainsaying that. All the same, I wish I were as certain Ozias'd go another cruise, as I am that he's as dogged, ay, and as spry too, as any skipper that sails out of hereabout. But it's luck we want—and Ozias the same. I know the loss of the *Pride* nearly broke me, and it's time the tide turned, or' — the boat-builder paused and wiped his brow — 'ay, nearly broke me it did, as you know, sir, and no one so well. But I'm not afeared of Ozias.'

Dr. Portnal nodded, and for a moment the two stood pondering the case. Then, 'However, I did not come to-day,' the Rector resumed in a brisker tone, 'to talk about this, but about another matter, Budgen. I hear that you have been so foolish as to take young Bligh into your place.'

The man bristled up. 'An' if I have ?'

The Rector raised his hand. 'It won't do,' he said. 'That's all, and all that is to be said. It won't do, Budgen. You must get rid of him. Understand me, I will not have it. To replace one sot by another is a folly I will not countenance ! You must get rid of the man at once.'

If Budgen had never hated the Rector before he hated him then. 'I don't know about that !' he said in his most crabbed tone. 'There's two to that.'

'But I do,' the Rector replied quietly. 'And there is only

one to it, Budgen. Do you hear? The man is a disgrace to us all, and he must go.'

'Not till I've had my say,' Budgen insisted doggedly. 'Nor till you have heard me, sir! No. The case is altered. Clean altered. Joe, he was out and out good for naught — not one hour's work did I get out of him. But the Lieutenant —'

'Pooh! man,' the Rector said contemptuously. 'He's no more Lieutenant now than I am!'

'The Lieutenant,' Budgen repeated stubbornly, 'he's worth the money I give him and more. And more! He keeps my books as never before, and then men as was constantly bickering with Joe works for him willing. Be I in the house or be I in the shed, the work's done, and not one drop o' drink have I seen him take since he've been with me! Swore off it, good!'

The Rector shook his head. 'When the devil was ill,' he said; 'you know the rest, Budgen. But I have said enough. I am not here to argue with you, and what I say must be done. I will not have a man who has disgraced the parish and himself employed here. And that is all — or we quarrel. And you best know whether that will suit you.'

If Budgen could have killed with a wish, Dr. Portnal would have returned over the bluff feet foremost. But Budgen could not, and he swallowed his wrath. 'Needs must,' he snarled, with as much insolence as he dared show, 'when the parson drives.'

'Budgen!'

But Budgen turned his back, and did it rudely. 'You've got your will,' he flung over his shoulder, 'for I am no better than a slave, and I have to do your bidding! But let's hear no more of it!' He went into the shed without more, and seeing him in that temper the Rector, offended as he was, thought it wise to let him go.

The visitor's step had ceased to sound on the shingle, and he had climbed half-way up the steep slope before Budgen

showed himself again. Then, finding his enemy still within sight, he threw a vicious curse after him. 'Ay, you great, big, black blot!' he said. 'There you go atrampling and atrampling, no matter what's underfoot. You'd send Joe to sea, would you, and get him killed off? As is the last life between you and the Cove, so as you may shift me and get a thumping big fine for re-letting! I know you! And you'd get rid o' the young chap as never crossed you — now I wonder why. I wonder what is at the bottom of that, you d — d black blot! I don't know now, but may be I shall. And if I weren't so deep in your books, with as good as nothing I can call my own, I'm hanged if you should have your way! No, d — n me, I'd ——'

He did not say what he would do, for at that moment the Rector passed out of sight over the brow, and the angry man turned into the shed and for some moments stood, staring absently at the lines of the *Peggy*. But his grievance still worked in him and worried him. 'He's got his claws into me, ay, too far into me,' he muttered. And for the hundredth time he reckoned up his position. The *Pride* — now in French hands — he had owned one-half of her, or thirty-two sixty-fourths as he put it — and Dr. Portnal had owned a quarter. The rest had lain with the crew and some small adventurers, tradesmen in Beremouth. But he had borrowed of the Rector to pay his share of her cruising cost, and the money was lost with the *Pride*, but the debt remained, and was ever growing. Of the *Peggy* his share had been also one-half — once; but the loss of the *Pride* had scared the small people who had interests in her, and he had bought them out cheap, making as he had fancied at the time a good bargain. But for that again he had borrowed the money from the Rector, charging the *Peggy* in his favour, and mortgaging the rest of his property for what it was worth. In outward show he was an independent, well-to-do man, envied and prosperous. His slips and his moulding-loft, his boats built and building, his cosy house and the cot-

tages scattered up and down the Cove made a fine show. But they were his on a lease for three lives only, and the last of the three, Joe Fewster's, alone remained, and stood between him and ruin. The lease was charged, with the *Peggy* and the rest, in the Rector's favour, and if the *Peggy* were lost the Rector would come down on all that he had. He would have no mercy, and the less as he owned a quarter of the *Peggy* and would himself be a loser if ill-luck befell her. Then equally, if Joe died, was Budgen a ruined man. But he refused to face that. That meant the end indeed, the end of everything, of the Cove and all that he had.

For he loved the Cove, as has been said. And he saw it hanging on the life of a rogue and the luck of a ship. He was not a happy man as he trudged with bent shoulders along the path to his warm house — the path that his father's feet had trodden, and his own feet had worn through fifty years.

CHAPTER VI

WHEN Lady Bicester became the tenant of the Grange, a house that lay a mile inland in the lap of the valley that opens on the sea at Beremouth, her welcome was not over-warm. The widow of a Mayor of Bristol who had gone up to St. James's with an Address and been knighted — the neighbouring squires referred to him slightly as one of Peg Nicholson's knights — she had three things against her, her newness, her title, and her money. But her ladyship had known where she stood. She had evinced a proper respect for old estates and landed dignities, and, giving all their due and a little more, she had gradually insinuated herself into the tolerance and the drawing-rooms of her neighbours.

In the execution of this task she had in her own opinion been hindered rather than helped by her daughter. Charlotte had shown herself from the first incurably blind to her inferior position. Her blunt address and the easy confidence with which she encountered all comers, from Dunch the barber, who did not matter, to Sir Albergy Wyke and the Lord Lieutenant who did, inflicted a hundred stabs on her mother's self-consciousness; and many a time had her ladyship winced in her company. But whether Charlotte's frankness set off her mother's complaisance, or more was tacitly allowed to a second generation, the girl had somehow been accepted as an equal, where her mother entered on sufferance. References to her lack of beauty were certainly common. 'That great blowsy girl!' overheard at an assembly or a hunt meeting generally meant Charlotte Bicester. But her plainness was

a healthy plainness not unpleasant to the other sex, while it undoubtedly smoothed her path with her own. In fact, and though Lady Bicester never suspected it, the good lady owed a large part of her success to her daughter's unaffected manner; for while Dr. Portnal seldom talked to the elder woman without his thoughts involuntarily flying to sugar and the slave-trade, he accepted Charlotte without demur, though naturally he thought her inferior to his daughters.

She rode with a nerve and skill not quite feminine; and often alone, to her mother's disgust. Dunch saw her one morning about this time as she passed down the narrow street, and occupied as he was in dressing a wig suspended to the door-post, he had the opportunity of appraising her points with a knowing eye. 'If she'd a face to match her figure,' he decided, 'there'd not be much amiss.' And as she drew rein to speak to him, 'You're blooming, my lady,' he said graciously.

'Whose wig is that?' Charlotte inquired, pointing to it with her whip. Wigs were going out of fashion, to Dunch's great loss. Even the Rector wore his own hair.

'Well, it's old Captain Bligh's, miss,' he said, standing back from it that he might review it the better. 'And not before it was time, though there's many a day that he don't wear it.'

'Then don't you overcharge him, Dunch,' Charlotte retorted. 'As you do me.'

Dunch grinned. 'No chance o' that,' he said, with a shake of the head that reflected on the Captain's purse or his liberality. 'He's too old a soldier. Nor, indeed, I wouldn't, miss, if I could — not now at any rate.'

'I wouldn't trust you,' Charlotte rejoined, reining in her horse. It disliked standing on the cobbles, and was inclined to fret. 'But why now, more than at other times, Dunch?'

Dunch let his hand drop. 'Haven't you heard, miss? That his son's on the street again?'

'On the street?' Charlotte gave her horse a clip with the

whip. 'What do you mean? I thought that he was working at the Cove. Someone told me so — why, it was only yesterday.'

'He was, my lady, true as true. But' — the barber looked mysterious — 'Budgen shifted him this three days past. And he's out now, no doubt about it!'

'Dear, dear, I'm sorry!' Charlotte exclaimed. 'I thought it so brave of him to take that work.'

'Well, he's out again, there's no doubt of that. The why I don't know, but there it is.'

'Give a dog a bad name, eh!' There was a gleam in Charlotte's eyes. 'I think it's horrid of Budgen, Dunch!'

'I suppose he knows his own business, miss. But I'm sorry myself. I never had but an easy word from the young man, and it's a come-down, there's no denying it. But work's slack at the Cove. It's may-be that.'

'No news of the Peggy, I suppose?'

'Not as I've heard. But she might come in at any time. And not alone, I hope. Barney Toll, he's mate on her, he lodges with me; and many a time I think of him stormy nights like.'

'I expect you've something in her, Dunch?'

Dunch shook his head. 'No, miss, not now. There's none in the town has, to my knowing. We got a fright when the *Pride* was taken. Ah, me! it was a sad business that! The old *Pride*! I saw her go out the last time as ever she went, looking that fair and gay and the bells ringing, and every soul in Beremouth on the quay, cheering and God-speeding her as you never see the like! Little we thought the Mounsires had as good as their grip on her! No, my lady, it's a ticklish game and parlous. Too many blanks and too few prizes for poor folk!'

Charlotte nodded, and moved on. She was going to the Rectory, where at this hour of the day cake and wine would be on offer in the drawing-room. As she rode at a walk up the winding road to the church she saw the old Captain

in front of her stumping up the hill to the churchyard; and something in his weary air, his limping gait and shabby coat touched her. When three minutes later she entered the Rectory drawing-room, she had him on her mind, and what Charlotte had on her mind she seldom failed to make known.

'Well, I think it's a shame !' she announced as she entered the room. 'And some one should tell that old bear, Budgen, what we think of him ! Mr. Fareham, you might ! No, Augusta, thank you, I've not your advantages, I'll sit with my back to the light. Yes, Peggy, Madeira, please, and a very large piece of that cake !'

'You'll grow stout, Charlotte.' This from Augusta.

'Not while there are men like old Budgen about,' Charlotte retorted. 'He makes me sick !'

'Why ?' Fareham asked. 'What has he done now, Miss Bicester ?'

'A very dirty trick, I think. Haven't you heard ?'

'We shall when you have told us,' Augusta said, smiling.

'And you really don't know ?' She turned to Peggy. 'Don't you know ?' But Peggy was on her feet, leaning over the cake-tray to set something straight, and she did not answer. 'I thought that you had some feeling for the man,' Charlotte persisted, 'if Augusta had not !' 'Pon honour, Augusta, I am not sure that you won't be pleased. That old Budgen has turned off Mr. Bligh !'

'No !' Fareham exclaimed. 'You don't say so ? I heard that the poor beggar had gone there. But I thought that he had only just started.'

'It's easier to throw things down than to set them up,' Augusta said sagely. 'A good character is more quickly lost than ——'

'Oh, don't preach, don't preach, Augusta !' Charlotte struck in. 'Or I declare I'll come and shake you. And you' — she turned on the young man — 'for heaven's sake do venture to disagree with Augusta for once. Pluck up a spirit ! Say you think it's a shame.'

Fareham coloured. What an uncomfortable person Charlotte could be ! 'Well,' he said, 'I did think it was rather fine of the fellow — in the Service and all that, you know, to — to knuckle down to it. But ——'

'But probably,' Augusta said in her matter-of-fact way, 'Budgen knows his own business best.'

'And that is all you have to say !' Charlotte retorted. 'What a bloodless creature you are, Augusta ! I think Budgen ought to be torn in pieces. He's not fit to live ! And if Peggy doesn't agree with me — you do think it's a shame, don't you, Peggy ?'

'Yes,' Peggy said. 'I do.' The blow had been severe, for this was the first that the girl had heard of it. And she could have said so much — so much upon it ! She could have surprised them all. But the consequences of speaking her mind — imprudent as she was they were ever before her eyes — were so grave that, though every nerve in her quivered with indignation, discretion carried it for once.

Her calmness surprised her sister. 'Peggy and I,' Augusta said, 'seldom think alike.'

'I can believe it,' Charlotte retorted. 'The one feels and the other glitters — like the chandelier there that gives out pretty lights and flashes, and not a spark of heat ! Yes, Augusta, I mean it. You are just like that, my dear !'

'And some people's heads are as soft as my silk,' Augusta returned, smiling indulgently. 'You've no duties, my dear, and no responsibilities, and no one looks to you for an example. But I, you see, am in my dear mother's place. I cannot be as easy as you are. I cannot think that this young man is a fitting object of sympathy, or upset myself because Budgen has got rid of him. You are not going, Peggy ?'

'Yes,' Peggy said hurriedly. 'I shall be back in a minute.' She had borne as much as she could bear.

'Well, for my part,' Charlotte declared roundly, 'I know

what I shall do. I shall go to Budgen and tell him what I think of him !

'You won't !' Augusta was shocked.

'I have a good mind to ! And if Mr. Fareham had the spirit of a man and wasn't in your pocket, my dear, he'd come with me and say the words I can't say ! After all, Mr. Bligh's a gentleman.'

'If you think so,' Augusta said, smiling, 'you know him better than I do.'

'Well, all I know of him is from meeting him here !' Charlotte rejoined, carrying the war into the enemy's country. 'Are you coming, Mr. Fareham ? No ! Well, I am going. Yes, I am going. Good-bye, all !' And picking up her long skirt she sailed from the room.

'Dear Charlotte !' Augusta said with a smile, when the door had closed on her. 'She does not look at things as we do. It is not to be expected she should, I suppose. Indeed I sometimes feel when I am listening to her that I can imagine just what her father was like — poor man !'

But a few minutes later, when Mr. Fareham had taken his leave and Augusta was left alone, her smile faded. She sat lost in thought, her face grave, and from time to time she glanced at the door as if she expected some one. Nor was she out in her reckoning. Presently she saw the handle move, and after a perceptible interval the door opened and Peggy came in. She walked to a window and stood awhile, her back to her sister. Then, 'Did you know of this ?' she asked in a low voice.

But Augusta was giving all her attention to her work. 'Of what, my dear ?' she asked absently.

'That Budgen had — had sent Mr. Bligh away ?' Peggy's voice trembled.

'Did I know that ? Yes, and' — Augusta raised her head from her work and spoke deliberately — 'I am glad of it. I think it was time, Peggy.'

'Why ?'

'Why do I think it was time? Because I am not blind, my dear. Nor, believe me, is your father, and I think it is time that you knew that also and took it to heart. He chooses to go his own way about things, and he does not show his hand. But I can assure you that he knows more than you suspect.'

'Do you mean' — this time there was no doubt about the quiver in Peggy's voice — 'that — that this is his doing?'

'I know nothing, but I can guess. My dear Peggy, you are like the ostrich. You stick your head in the sand and think that no one sees you, because you see no one. But I have not my head in the sand,' Augusta continued calmly, 'and unless I am mistaken Sir Albery has spoken to your father and this is the result. If you are foolish he is not, and he does not intend his plans to be spoiled by silly gossip arising from your imprudence, my dear — and that is a danger of which he is fully aware. So the sooner you see things as they are and must be, the better it will be for you.'

'And he's — he's been to Budgen?' It was with difficulty Peggy could frame the words. To find that so much was known, to have the cloak that hid her secret from all eyes thus coldly and deliberately withdrawn, was a shock which almost overcame her.

'I suspect that he has,' Augusta replied, as quietly as she had spoken throughout. 'Though I have no more knowledge of that than you have. But I am sure of this. If he thinks that there is the smallest risk of your making a fool of yourself — and you may be sure that a good many besides your father know more than you suppose — he will see this young man out of Beremouth whatever it costs.'

'Whatever it costs,' Peggy repeated mechanically. Her thoughts were still astray, scattered by the shock of her sister's plain speaking.

'Well, you know him, and he is not one to fail in what he undertakes — at any rate in Beremouth. That young man will have to go, my dear. I think they will both have

to go. Your father will see to that, too, I expect. He'll move them out of the Cottage. But you know him as well as I do, and you know that he is not one to make a noise. But he gets his way, Peggy.'

'Not always !' There was a new note in Peggy's voice.

'I have never known him fail,' Augusta replied, 'where he was in earnest.'

'Well, he will fail this time !' Peggy exclaimed. Surprise and dismay had given place to anger. Her voice rang with indignation.

'I think not,' Augusta replied, unmoved. 'And in a year's time, my dear, when you are Lady Wyke and reigning at Upper Bere, you will know that he was right, and thank him for it, Peggy.'

'Never ! Never !' Peggy cried passionately. But she could bear no more. She could no longer control herself or her voice, and swept by such a storm of feeling as her young life had never known, the girl hurried blindly from the room.

Oh, the meanness, the unfairness, the cruelty of it ! To strike at him, to ruin him, to drive him from the place and rob him of the humble work to which he had stooped, of the pittance that he had bent himself to earn ! Oh, it was vile, it was intolerable, she thought. And they had watched, spied, seen ! And then, smiling at her innocence, they had struck at him whom fortune had already wounded so sorely, at him whom she held dearer than her life ! For her, for her fault and because she loved him, they would punish him, they would sacrifice him, would grind him into the dust and strip him of the little that stood between him and want, of the one hope that rose between him and his weakness !

Then, if they could do this, if they had the heart to do this, what had she in common with them ? Nothing, nothing, she cried passionately, as she paced her room, her breast swelling with pity and indignation. Nothing — if they could do so base, so cruel a thing, could lend themselves to

so mean a revenge! They, who if they had their way, would constrain and swaddle and force her to their will! Nothing! The air they breathed choked her, the thoughts they thought were not hers, the idols they worshipped she hated! But she would be no puppet to be moved hither and thither, and bought and sold as they would! She would free herself — free herself for ever! Surely life held more than this, held things purer and higher, things real and true.

Swept by a storm of passion, not ignoble, the girl passed through a bitter hour. But the habits of a life are not to be easily put off, the ties of nature are strong, and the thoughts of the young are short thoughts. The day gave time for reflection even to Peggy, ardent and love-smitten. In the silence of her room a small voice gradually made itself heard. Her home and the affections that were bound up with it appealed to her. And it was in a more sober and a chastened mood that late that evening, when the house was quiet and dark about her, she stole softly down and listened at the door of her father's study. A light still burned within, and though this was what she had foreseen — or she had not come down — she paused with her hand raised. She hung a long minute, trembling, irresolute, summoning up her courage, calling despair to her aid. For it was a great, an appalling effort that she was making, and the natural woman shrank from the ordeal. But at last she knocked.

The Rector had no liking to be interrupted save at his own hours, which were well known to the household; and it was in no inviting tone that he bade the unknown enter. But when he saw who it was, the frown passed from his brow. He sat back in his chair. 'Oh, it is you, Peggy, is it?' he said cheerfully. 'What is it, my dear? It is late. I thought that you were in bed.'

Her heart beat so fast that it threatened to choke her. Now that the moment was come, she found it hard, she found it almost impossible to speak; and no doubt her pale, scared face betrayed her. Before her dry lips could frame

a word the Rector knew, if he had not already guessed her errand, and what she would be at; and he had determined how he would deal with her. 'What is it?' he repeated blandly. 'What do you want, my dear, at this hour?'

'It is about — about Mr. Bligh,' she stammered, forcing herself to utter the name that it cost her so much to utter. 'I — I want to say that — that if you will let him ——'

The Rector cut her short. 'Mr. Bligh?' he said, his voice rising a note. His tone was still suave, and he still smiled at her. But he lifted his hand, and the gesture was as firm as it was pregnant. 'No!' he said. 'No, my dear. Mr. Bligh is not a subject or a person that I am prepared to discuss with you. It is not a question for you.'

'But — but it is,' she gasped, snatching desperately at the skirts of her courage. 'Oh, it is, sir! I beseech you to hear me. For if — if you will let him remain, I will promise ——'

He stopped her. His face was no longer either bland or pleasant. 'I have spoken,' he said. 'I have told you that I am not prepared to discuss the matter with you, and that is enough for you, and final. I will hear nothing — nothing, you understand. And I have nothing to say to you. It is late and I am busy. You will go to bed — at once, if you please.'

She made a last effort. 'But you — you don't understand!' she pleaded, her face colourless, her eyes imploring. 'If you will let him remain, sir, I will promise not — not to see him again, or ——'

But his face was inflexible. He pointed to the door. 'No!' he said, and he spoke very sternly now, in a tone that forbade reply. 'I am not foolish enough to hear what you may be foolish enough to speak. Go to bed. Go and shut the door quietly. And pray, pray, girl, before you sleep, that you may be made wiser and more obedient. And more discreet.'

She went.

CHAPTER VII

MI-AW ! Mi-aw ! Mi-aw !

‘That wretched cat !’ Augusta exclaimed. She sat up in bed, her soul thirsting for vengeance, her body reluctant to leave its warm nest. Must she get up and drive that abominable cat away, or would Peggy, who slept only one door farther down the passage, save her the trouble ? The grey dawn was peeping in between the closed curtains, but the room was dim, and with indignation Augusta decided that it could not be more than five o’clock.

And it was the third or fourth time she had suffered in this way: that puss prowling through the house, complaining in falsetto of the lateness of the household and in particular of that slug-abed the kitchen-maid, had roused her. But five o’clock ! And if the servants had closed the door that they should have closed, this would not have happened. Augusta fumed, but there was nothing else for it; she must let Pat through. The cat’s voice rose more piercing than before and she set a reluctant foot on the floor and felt for a slipper.

Then she paused, for she heard Peggy moving, and Peggy might as well cross the cold boards as she. Augusta drew in her shapely foot, and was sinking back on her pillow when a third time the cat mewed — and still Peggy’s door remained shut. Yet the girl was moving, Augusta could hear her; moving softly, yet audibly, as if, the listener reflected with a frown, she were getting up.

Then, at long last, Peggy’s door did open, and Augusta heard her, in a subdued tone, shoo the cat down stairs.

Augusta sank back; all was well. But, alas! she was now wide awake, and so apparently was Peggy. For the sounds next door continued, light feet went to and fro, once a chair was moved, and once there was a faint jar as of crockery. Peggy must be dressing.

At five o'clock? Impossible! Augusta sat up, and whether it was the cold light or her thoughts that sharpened her features she looked less handsome than usual. She stepped from her bed and stole barefoot to her door. With care she opened it an inch or so and, heedless of the draught that swept through the narrow aperture and chilled her thinly-clad form, she listened, peering into the passage.

On the landing was an uncurtained window which made it lighter than her room, and all that was there could be clearly seen. Yet for a full five minutes Augusta continued to peer and to listen, though all that she could now hear was the cat's distant complaint rising from some lower floor. At length that which she expected happened. With a faint creak Peggy's door moved, opened, and the girl appeared, dressed in a hat and cloak and carrying a bag. She closed the door softly behind her, and moved along the passage towards the watcher and also towards the stairs.

But mid-way she paused: her eyes had taken in the unclosed door. She stared at it, and for a few dramatic seconds the two sisters gazed at one another, or seemed to do so. But Augusta, assured that, lost in the gloom of her room, she was invisible, did not stir, and presently Peggy went by with a light step and disappeared in the direction of the stairs.

The watcher drew a deep breath. She stepped back a pace, but she did not take her hand from the door. And later — later and often — she persuaded herself that she had hesitated; that it had been in her mind to stay her sister, and that only surprise and Peggy's haste had forestalled her purpose. Be that as it may, she made no attempt to follow, though, during the time that she stood with her hand on the door, she might have overtaken the fugitive and put before her the

rashness of the step that she was taking and the unhappiness that she was laying up for herself. Augusta might have done this, but she did not. Conceivably she shrank in her modesty from going through the house in her night-dress.

Instead she stood listening, until a vibration rather than a sound told her that the door of the house had been closed. Then, shutting her own door, she crept stealthily back to her bed, and sitting up in it with her arms about her knees, gave herself to thought.

Possibly she recalled the long years — for the years of youth are long — during which they had grown up together, sleeping side by side, or the later days when they had flitted in and out of their rooms to gossip, and morning by morning had descended the same stairs; or the nights when they had brushed one another's hair, and, home from ball or assembly, had exchanged their tales of girlish triumphs, trotting out their partners, laughing or lamenting. And the remembrance of this communion, grown into a habit, yet in these last months discarded, may have penetrated to her heart, and troubled her.

Or her thoughts may have run otherwise. For after all this ending was Peggy's choice, not hers, Peggy's headstrong act, not hers! If Peggy chose to have her heart's desire and to pay for it, as assuredly she would pay for it — or virtue and obedience were mere words — it was Peggy's business, not hers. The girl could not have it both ways, and if she had chosen to put her lover before father and sister, home and duty — silly, undisciplined Peggy! — she would have no one to blame for the consequences but herself. And — and at any rate the field was clear!

Yes, the field was clear now, and Sir Albergy at liberty.

When, some hours later, Dr. Portnal stood ready, his Jove-like head erect and his glasses adjusted, to read prayers to his household, his eyes fell on an empty chair. He paused.

'Where is Miss Peggy?' he demanded.

The servants were silent. It fell to Augusta to answer.

'I am afraid — that she is late, sir,' she said.

'Then she should not be late !' The Rector's gaze travelled severely along the line of servants and alighted on a certain maid. 'Tell your mistress,' he said, amid a portentous silence, 'that I am waiting.'

The maid wilted away. The household stood looking to the front. Presently the girl returned.

'Miss Peggy is not in her room, sir,' she said.

'Not in her room ?' The Rector turned to Augusta. 'Where is she ?' No shade of misgiving clouded his mind. All about him was as usual, the spacious well-ordered room, the row of grave servants, the sunshine twinkling on china and glass; all was as it had been morning by morning for years past.

Timidly Augusta made a suggestion. Peggy might be in the garden. On that Jove, withholding his thunderbolt but making it clear that it impended, waited no longer but burst into a denunciatory psalm in a tone that did the theme justice. This finished, and the rites which followed performed, he stood gazing with an angry brow at the door, prepared to deal with the offender the moment that she appeared.

But Wignall brought in the hot dishes, and still no Peggy entered.

Disturbed at last, 'I don't understand,' the Rector said, turning and addressing Augusta sharply. 'Where is your sister ?'

'I cannot imagine,' Augusta replied. 'She is usually in time, sir.'

'She is not in time to-day. Wignall, find your young mistress, and send her to me. At once, do you hear ! I am seriously displeased with her.'

Wignall may have had his thoughts and even his suspicions, but it was not for him to speak and he went away on his errand. When he returned his face was grave.

'Miss Peggy is not in the house, sir,' he said, 'nor in the garden.'

'Then where can she be? I am most seriously displeased.'

'The maid says, sir' — Wignall hesitated an instant — 'that she has taken a bag with her.'

'Taken a bag?' Dr. Portnal laid down his knife and fork and sat back in his chair. He glowered at the butler as if he were the person in fault. 'Nonsense, man, nonsense!' he said. 'What do you mean? Taken a bag?'

But Wignall, an old servant, held his ground. 'The maid says so, sir,' he persisted, dropping his voice. 'She thinks that — that there are things missing from her room, sir.'

How quickly the dart of calamity, barbed and poisoning life at its source, may penetrate to the unsuspecting, unready, shrinking mind it is impossible to say. Probably it took but a few seconds for the first smart of the wound to reach the Rector's understanding and to infect him with fear — a fear so amazing, so incredible, so subversive of the orderly world about him, that he still strove to deny its existence. For a moment he stared at Wignall, intolerant of the man's stupidity. The next his features swelled, his eyes protruded, and the voice in which he addressed Augusta, as he turned to her, made even Augusta quail.

'What does this mean?' he thundered.

She had risen in alarm that was only half feigned. 'Indeed, I don't know,' she stammered. 'I cannot imagine. Jane must be mistaken.'

'Look to it.' The rector's voice was hoarse. 'Go, see, girl! See! And you!' He turned to the butler. 'I will ring when I want you.'

Augusta escaped in haste, and left alone the Rector rose and strode to the window. He looked out. A flood of wrath, and of what was worse of alarm, rushed to his head, swelled his temples, beat against his self-control. He stared through the window, but he saw nothing. The smooth,

well-mown lawn, shaded by a spreading cedar and shielded from the sea-winds by grey walls fragrant in their season with gilly-flowers; might have been the desert of Arabia for all that he saw of it. That which he did see was a thing that he shuddered to contemplate — the spectre of an appalling, and he still strove to think an impossible, calamity ! He had stood so high, he had been so proud; proud of his position, of the prosperity of his ordered life, of the success that had hitherto attended him, proud above all things of the sagacity that had ensured him against the mishaps of the common herd and made him the adviser of his fellows ! He had held his head high, he had stood above disgrace, he had deemed himself able, if ever man was able, to steer clear of the follies and errors into which lesser men fell.

But if this, this that his awakened suspicions shrank from contemplating, had befallen him — what of his pride and his sagacity and his reputation for wisdom ? But it was impossible, he told himself, it was impossible ! He strove to reassure himself, to gather together his shattered forces. Such a thing might happen to others, but not to him ! Yet, if it had ? He forced himself to face the thought, to take in the worst, to view with a shrinking eye the appalling consequences. And he shuddered at the things that he saw. He heard already the sniggering of men who did not love him, he saw the faces of friends averted in pity, he winced under the sympathy of well-meaning idiots.

A weaker man might have given thought to the case of another, and viewed with sorrow the other side of the matter. Such a one might have been cut to the heart by the fate of a daughter who, in her reckless imprudence, had placed herself in the hands of an adventurer and committed her fortunes to a penniless and an unscrupulous man. But the Rector, at any rate in this first burst of the matter, was not so weak. If she had done this — this cruel, this unpardonable thing — if she had so disparaged him, so degraded him in

the world's eye, she was no child of his. He disowned her, he cast her off!

But he could not and he would not believe it. When the door at length opened and Augusta stole in, her face pale and alarmed, 'Well!' he cried. 'Well! What is all this? What does it mean? Speak, girl!'

Augusta faltered. 'I am afraid, sir, that she is gone,' she said.

He glared at her. 'Gone!' he cried. 'Gone! Where? How? What do you mean?' His heart sank low, but he would not let himself believe the worst.

'I am afraid — with him, sir,' Augusta replied sorrowfully. 'Her bag is gone — and some of her things.'

He had to face it now. He could no longer refuse to believe. His daughter gone! His daughter! Gone, fled, with a penniless, nameless, broken adventurer! With the son of the drunken old man whom he had declared a disgrace to his parish, and whom even the petty tradesfolk pitied and viewed askance! His daughter! He stood, the healthy colour driven from his face, but for the moment he could neither speak nor think. He could only feel, like a man who had fallen over a precipice and was stunned, that a dreadful thing had befallen him, that his life lay wounded, his pride in the dust. He envisaged hateful things, humiliations unspeakable. He stumbled, dazed, in a wilderness strange to him and terrible, where no landmarks were.

It was Augusta who brought him back to himself, Augusta who broke the intolerable silence. Accustomed, like all women, to deal with details, she felt the call to action.

'Perhaps,' she murmured uncertainly, 'if you were to go, sir, — to the Cottage. It may not be too late.'

But he thrust the suggestion from him. Go out into his parish and ask here and there for his daughter? Publish his shame broadcast in Beremouth? Inquire at the inn if they had seen her, at the quay if she had taken the Plymouth

Boat? Never! Let her go first! Let her go and lie in the bed that she had made for herself, and drink to the dregs the cup that her heartlessness and her misconduct had filled! Deceitful, abandoned, shameless girl, let her suffer! He would not stretch out a hand to save her. She had disgraced him! She had disgraced him!

But Augusta, who had had time to review the position, had her own notions of what should be done, and what was becoming. She had no doubt that Peggy was by this time beyond pursuit, but she saw that notwithstanding this it behooved her father to do something, to take some step, were it only for appearances' sake. She persisted, therefore, with the gentleness but also the firmness that was characteristic of her.

'Still, I think, sir,' she said, 'that you should go to the Blighs.' It was noticeable that neither of them now doubted what had happened.

But again and angrily he put the suggestion from him. Seeing this Augusta did not argue, but with a woman's firm grasp of reality she went to the table and poured out a cup of tea. She took it to him where he stood grim and repellent at the window.

'Drink this, sir,' she said. 'You will be able to think better what must be done.'

He complied, almost against his will. He drank the tea thirstily and he, too, felt the relief of reality. Some minutes later he spoke.

'I will go to the man's,' he said.

'You may learn something, sir.'

He shook his head. 'It is too late,' he said. 'It is too late.'

'Too late to avoid talk, I fear. Still ——'

'Too late for everything,' he repeated grimly. 'Too late.'

But presently he moved. He went into the hall and she gave him his hat and cane, and after a moment's pause, but without further words, he left the house. The gardener had

gone to the back door, and at this moment was greedily drinking in the news. There was no one, therefore, to see him as he passed, yet he felt that the eyes of all Beremouth were on him, and if he did not curse his daughter it was only because he was not a man of wild words or extravagant actions. But his face was hard. The thing that he had to do was the most distasteful that he had had to confront for many a year, and his pride bled as he looked forward to it. Still, now that he came to reflect, he owned that he could not avoid it, that so much would be expected of him. But this done, he would do no more. Henceforth she was no child of his, and he hoped that he might never see her, that if it might be so, he might never hear of her again. Let her be as if she had never been, let her share the cup that he found so intolerably bitter.

He had only to cross the graveyard by the flagged-walk that passed the west end of the church, and thence to descend by the flight of steps that dropped to the steep path that went down to the Cove. As he went heavily down, the descent painful to a man of his years and weight, it seemed to him an age since he had risen free from care, from fear, from thought of this horror. Ay, an age, and how much had happened in that age ! The shining surface below him, sparkling under the rays of the sun, wore a new, a hard, a pitiless aspect for him. It cared nothing, it smiled at his troubles, it mocked at his degradation.

CHAPTER VIII

IT WAS not expected of a man in Dr. Portnal's position that he should stoop to the humbler duties of his calling. He left the care of individuals, as he left the oversight of Ipe and Downton and Chiddingfold, to his curates. Even within his home parish he visited only, like the wind, where he listed, and it happened that he had not been in the Cottage on the cliff since the Blighs had lived in it. Had this morning been as other mornings he would have felt, as he jerked open the wicket-gate, some curiosity as to the household. But to-day his mind had only room for one thought, the disgrace that had befallen him; and though he had the strength to carry his head high and to mask the turmoil that shook his soul, no soldier straining for the deadly breach ever suffered more.

Still, his mind made up, he was not the man to blench. He strode through the little gateway and struck the door a sharp blow with the head of his cane; then, without pause or ceremony, he opened the door. He counted on the effect of surprise, and possibly at the last moment entertained the hope that his daughter had not yet pushed her flight farther. If so, they little knew him if they imagined that, of age though she was — and by three weeks he remembered — he would not drag her thence! They little knew him if they fancied that she would dare to defy him! The law? He was the law in Beremouth, and he would make them know it. For, alas, put to the test, he was but an angry man like another, and all his wise apothegms were as useless to him as last year's leaves!

He armed himself, then, with all the terrors of his brow,

and in one respect his expectations were fulfilled. The old man who scrambled to his feet in a panic, and stared at him across the meagre table, could not have looked more startled, if in his stead a thunderbolt had entered. The Rector cast one searching look round the humble room, saw that no one but the Captain was present, and acted.

‘Where is my daughter?’ he thundered, and he advanced on his victim. ‘Old man, where is my daughter?’ He shook his cane in the air. ‘It is useless to lie to me!’

The Captain clutched the table. ‘Lord a Mighty!’ he quavered, gazing in amazement at his visitor. The Rector saw that his knees shook under him, and that he had much ado to stand.

But mercy was far from Dr. Portnal’s thoughts. He took terror for guilt, and, ‘Answer, sir!’ he repeated. If the table had not been between them he would have taken the old man by the collar and shaken him. ‘Answer me, or it will be the worse for you! Where is my daughter, sir?’

Alas, the Captain made a poor fight for it, and cut a worse figure! Poverty, misfortune, and his failing had long sapped his spirit and lowered his pride, and before this monstrous apparition, this angry Jove, whose swelling figure dwarfed the room, and whose voice shook the rafters, he was but a scared, subservient, downtrodden creature.

‘What — what is it?’ he gasped. ‘As God sees me I don’t understand. Indeed, indeed, sir, I don’t understand.’

Dr. Portnal shook his cane. ‘What have you, or what has your knave of a son done with my daughter?’ he repeated. ‘Answer me! Or — but I will see! By Heaven, I will see for myself! I will not be played with! You shall not triumph in your knavery!’

And impetuously crossing the floor to an inner door — for he knew the premises — he flung it wide. But with the strategic point in his power he paused. He looked behind him to see that the room contained no hiding-place large enough to conceal a person. Assured of this, he climbed with

violence the narrow staircase, his weight shaking the beams, and his angry breathing going before him like a steam. But above-stairs there were only two rooms and both the doors stood open; in a trice the Rector saw his search fruitless, and before the Captain, still in a maze at these frantic proceedings, had gathered his wits, the Rector was down again.

The table no longer intervened, and rage mastered him. He seized the old man by the shoulder and shook him to and fro as he would have shaken a naughty child.

'Where is she? Where is she?' he demanded. 'And where is your drunken, your debauched son? Where have you hidden them?'

But this was too much for the old soldier. Stung in his tenderest point he plucked up a spirit.

'I don't understand a word you are saying,' he declared. 'Not a word! Not a word!'

'Your son? Your son?'

'He has stepped out. He stepped out not five minutes ago. But I don't know what——'

'He slept here?'

'Of course he slept here!' Even a worm will turn, and the words this madman had spoken of his boy had roused as much of manhood as remained in the father. 'He slept here,' he continued indignantly. 'Certainly he did. But what is that to you? You take a liberty, sir, or you are mad! Or you are mad!' the Captain repeated, the colour rising to his worn face. 'I will ask you to explain, sir. For I don't understand a word you are saying. Nor what is your business here.'

There was something so simple in the other's tremulous indignation that the Rector was sobered and for the moment silenced. He began to doubt, and to doubt succeeded dismay. Had he made a mistake? His hand dropped, he stepped back. He looked round him, and as the mist of passion cleared from his eyes he took in what he saw — the room threadbare but clean, the humble ornament here and there,

the single row of books, the sword slung above the fire-place, and over it a print of a frigate running before the wind. The place resembled a ship's cabin in its neatness, its order. On a carpenter's bench in a corner lay a model of a barque half-rigged. Above this a Byzantine-looking enamel broke the whitewashed wall with a splash of colour out of character with its surroundings.

As the Rector gazed, his mind fell into some sort of order. He passed his hand across his brow, and by an effort he collected his thoughts. The violence into which he had been betrayed had done nothing for him; it had but disclosed his trouble. Yet his errand was still to do, he had still to find his daughter or to learn what had happened to her. But he did not see his next step, and he was still glaring about him in angry doubt, though he was inclined to think that the Captain had told him the truth, when the sound of the wicket-gate striking the post broke in on his thoughts. A brisk step trod the path, a form darkened the doorway and barred out the reflected sunshine that shimmered on the rafters.

The Rector turned and saw within two paces of him the man who had brought this evil upon him. And if his gaze could have blasted, young Bligh would have ceased to breathe. But the evil eye has lost its power, and this young man's impudence was proof against scathing looks. Unmoved, with the glimmer of a smile in his eyes, he met the Rector's gaze, and 'Hello, father!' he said with provoking indifference. 'What's this? What is the matter?'

The Captain began to explain. 'It's Dr. Portnal,' he stammered, 'he's come to ask—he wants to know, Charles——'

But the Rector read the amusement in the young man's eyes, and his wrath blazed up afresh. He cut the old man short. 'Where is my daughter?' he demanded. 'Where is she, sir? What have you done with her?'

But young Bligh's impudence was proof even against this.

He did not quail. Indeed he smiled. 'You do me too much honour,' he said. And it seemed to the Rector that he rallied him.

Dr. Portnal's face grew purple. 'Don't bandy words with me, sir !' he thundered. 'Where is she ?'

The young man looked at the clock. 'I am sure I cannot say,' he replied. 'But I should suppose that she is about finishing her breakfast. You are early, sir.'

The Rector had not been so bearded for years. Men had stood up to him, but not after this fashion. Men had opposed him, but not with contempt. He did not have a fit; he was a healthy man, and it was well that he was. But he came very near to it.

'Do you dare — do you dare to tell me, sir,' he cried with ill-governed fury, 'that you know nothing of her ?'

'I dare tell you anything,' Bligh retorted, as calmly as he had spoken before. 'But I tell you nothing. She is in your care, not mine. I am not responsible for her. Do I gather' — and the mischievous sparkle in his eyes belied the innocence of his words — 'that she has left you ? If she has, all that I can say is that she is not here. And I, as you see, am here.'

The Rector could hardly contain himself. If he had ever doubted, he no longer doubted that he owed his misfortune to this man.

'Insolent !' he retorted. 'But you shall smart for this ! You shall repent of this ! You shall repent before I have done with you.'

Bligh shrugged his shoulders. 'Possibly,' he said. 'I repent of many things, and I may repent of this.'

'And you will not answer me ? You refuse to answer me ?'

'Absolutely. It is not my affair to take care of your daughter. I have not lost her, and it is not my business to find her.' He smiled — mockery could go no further.

But the old man, listening in alarm and amazement, could

no longer be silent. He saw his son in conflict with the powers that were, he knew of old their long arm and the defencelessness of the poor who fell under their ban, and he apprehended dreadful things.

'Charles! Charles!' he pleaded. 'Be moderate. Be moderate, my son. This is ill work!' And, while by a gesture he deprecated the Rector's wrath, 'Tell — tell Dr. Portnal that you know nothing of his daughter.'

'I will tell him,' Charles Bligh replied, 'one thing, father, and it is the only thing he has a right to ask. His daughter is not here.'

'And you will not tell me where she is?' the Rector cried.

'No, certainly not. If I knew, I would not.' And with that Bligh's voice rose, his eyes sparkled, his real feelings showed themselves. 'Why should I?' he asked sternly. 'What do I owe you? You have done your utmost, you have gone out of your way to harm me! You have ruined me as far as lay in your power! You have driven me from my employment, and have taken my livelihood — a poor livelihood, God knows! — from me. What more you can do, I do not know, but for the future I fear you no more than I fear the china idol on that dresser! Your daughter is not here; so much I have told you. And I shall tell you no more. You can go elsewhere for your information, sir. You will not get it here.'

The Rector gasped. Words such as these, a challenge as open as this he had not encountered since the day when still a young man he had begun to be a power in Beremouth and he was shocked as well as enraged; shocked as by the sight of some unnatural thing vomited from the earth. But as a champion who perceives that he has met a foeman worthy of his steel derives prudence from the knowledge, so it was with him. Though the determination to crush the upstart was but strengthened, though he felt for him a hatred beside which the passion that he had harboured ten minutes before was but as the spark beside the fire it has kindled, he

saw that he would gain nothing by altercation. Deeds, not words, must be his answer — if it were possible. With a gesture that called heaven to witness the outrage, he waved his opponent from his path.

‘You will repent of this!’ he said, and his words were not wanting in dignity. ‘You will repent of this! You have met me, young man, with insolence, you have mocked me and defied me! It shall be my part to see that you do not profit by the deceit of which I believe you to be guilty! On your head be the consequences.’

He turned and went out through the doorway. The habit of power had endued the man with the outward show of it, and his retreat did him credit. He opened the wicket-gate, and ascended the path.

But his knees as he breasted the slope shook under him, his lips twitched beyond his power to steady them. And sorely did he repent that he had ever descended that path, ever stooped to his errand or exposed himself to the rebuff. The shame of his defeat hardened his heart, and of this in his present temper he was glad. It steeled him against the pity that might have awakened in him, against the affection and remembrance that might presently have stirred, nay, that would surely have stirred, in his breast. Words of which he might have repented, he repeated. He vowed with passion that if his daughter had done this thing — and he had given up hope that she had not — she should no longer be child of his! He disowned her, he flung her off! She deserved no better, castaway as she was and lost to all sense of virtue, of decency, of self-respect! Ay, a castaway! He repeated the word with bitterness.

When Augusta, wearing an anxious face, met him in the hall, he waved her aside.

‘She is not there,’ he said. ‘I can tell you no more. I was met with insult and defiance. They would tell me nothing!’ And he shut himself into his study, leaving the girl more than a little shaken by his manner. The thing

had gone deeper, its effects promised to be more serious than she had foreseen.

He did not reappear, though she hung about the door for a time, hoping to intercept him. He had spoken as if his mind was made up, and the matter at an end. But Augusta could not be satisfied. She had a feeling that, if only to preserve appearances, something more must be done. Some inquiries must be made, some steps taken to ascertain what had happened. The world would expect it, and Augusta thought much of the world's opinion. At midday, taking her courage in her hands, she went in to him.

He did not turn at her approach or look at her. He sat in his chair leaning forward over the empty hearth. But she clung to her purpose.

'Do you think that there is nothing more that we can do, sir?' she ventured.

'What do you mean?'

'To — to learn where she is?'

'I shall do nothing!' he declared, and she saw that he meant it. 'Nothing! Your sister has made her bed and she must lie on it. She has deceived her father and abandoned her home! She has degraded herself and disgraced me. She is no longer child of mine.'

Augusta winced. She had not quite pictured this. She had not foreseen that things would come so speedily to a point so desperate and final. The fact disturbed and even shocked her. But she saw that his mood was not to be trifled with, his will had always been law in his house, and after lingering a minute in the hope that he would add something, her courage failed her and she left him.

But she was ridden by the thought, born in part of certain scruples, that things could not be left there; that something more must be done, no matter how painful inquiry and pursuit might be. A daughter could not be cast off so lightly; even a daughter who had fled from her home and abandoned her duty could not be discarded without an ef-

fort to reclaim her. They could not sit down with folded hands and make no sign. She was afraid to venture again into her father's room, but after some thought she took it on herself to act. Confiding in her maid, but telling her no more than the girl knew already — for the house was humming with the scandal — she sent her out to make inquiry. If little came of it, and she expected little, it would at least satisfy the world, and ease the pangs of a conscience that was not over-tender.

The woman went on her errand, and no doubt relished to the full the part assigned to her. It was the day of her life. She made her inquiries here and there, and before night she was able to report that Miss Peggy had neither posted from the only inn that boasted a post-chaise, nor taken the east or the west-bound coach. But she was gone, and very cleverly. She had boarded a boat that, starting from Beremouth at six in the morning, conveyed passengers on that particular day to a fair at Saltash, putting in at Plymouth by the way. She had stolen on board, cloaked and veiled, and had no doubt done her best to shun notice. But three persons, at least, had seen her and recognised her.

'But if he has not gone?' Augusta reflected. And she was puzzled. Timidly she conveyed the news to her father. Surely he ought to follow, if it were only to satisfy his fellows that he had done his duty. But the Rector received the news in silence and with a forbidding face, and made no move.

CHAPTER IX

UPPER BERE — those who lived in and about it called it simply the Manor — was a long low house, on the northern slope of the valley that two miles below opened on the sea at Beremouth. It stood in a small park and looked over meadows sinking gently to the river Bere, and the green curves of the land about it wore the soft rounded outlines that mark the features alike of Devon men and Devon landscapes. The front of the house, which was faced with mellow rough-cast, showed five gables, the eastern and western of which came forward a few feet and formed a sun-trap about the door and the seats of water-worn teak that flanked it.

Two bygone generations of Wykes had used those seats, had smoked tobacco on them, and there of a morning drunk old October and of an evening sound port; had, seated on them, heard with due dignity Justices' cases, or watched a main of cocks, or with sleepy Devon eyes measured the home-coppices and the farm lands in the vale below. And though the present Squire had not, like the Admiral and the Captain before him, been bred to the sea, the love of clean well-swabbed timber was in Sir Alberty also, and he loved to lounge there. Of the two, habit led him to the seat on the right, and many a morning of late he had lingered there, scratched the spaniel's head, and lost himself in a vision, and always the same vision — of Peggy, Peggy Portnal' that once had been, seated beside him or playing with old Nep at his feet, her ringlets falling over her face and her youth and girl-ish laughter belying the fact that she was the mistress of the house.

He sat there on this May morning and, as he smoked his pipe, a fatuous smile betrayed his thoughts. Surely by this time three months the home would have its mistress, and the housekeeper's book, ever presented at unwelcome moments, would have ceased to fret, and the sheep killed last Friday to last something short of a week ! Then, if he had still to scold, he must scold the dear extravagant whose wilful ways and pouting lips would win forgiveness for a world of waste. Oh, happy day, oh, welcome extravagance, he thought. Oh, happy sheep whose short-lived saddle gave such tender sport, whose legs proved bones of contention so soon over, a cause for upbraidings so gentle !

The picture was too much for him, too vivid, too intoxicating. Impossible to sit still with that Tantalus draught at his lips, to sit and scratch Nep's head, that fancy saw caressed by those slender fingers, kissed by those shy lips ! He rose and with an air of purpose he strode to the sundial. His hands plunged deep in his breeches' fobs, he gazed intently at it — and saw nothing. He moved to the brink of the ha-ha that divided the lawn from the park and in a foolish rapture he gloated over the nettles and docks that lined it. But even this did not satisfy; he muttered 'Oh, d — n !' and turned towards the house. It was early, too early to visit. But he could have his hair cut, he could ask about the cast-nets that the gardener needed, he could breathe the salt air that she breathed. And by that time — he dragged down the iron bell-pull, and when the man came, ordered his horse. He ordered it with shamefacedness; was not he always ordering it on the same errand so that he fancied that the very servants smiled at his plight ? But, hang it, what was there to do at home ? Or worth the doing as long as that matter remained unsettled ? He must summon up courage. He must bring things to a head.

He fetched his hat and whip from the spacious hall that was shady in summer and warm in winter, and while he

waited, impatient to be off, he viewed from the doorstep his possessions, and wished for her sake that they were more. Half of the valley was his and he could lay it at her feet; and with it the roomy old house of his race, that was neither stately nor splendid, yet wore from parlour to garret the air that long possession alone can give. If only he himself had been more worthy of her ! And impatiently, though the horse was even then pacing into sight round the corner of the house, he went in and sought the dining-room, and for the thousandth time he planted himself before the portrait of his grandfather, the Admiral, that hung above the fire-place. He had gazed at it often of late, and always with the same envy, the same wonder. The sea-dog who had sailed the sea in rough times, who had been at Porto Rico with Vernon, who had served and fretted under Matthews, who had given his indignant testimony on Byng's behalf, and had lived to erase the unworthy past on that wild and terrible night amid the breakers and howling gales of Quiberon — he lived here on canvas in the beauty of early manhood, effeminately handsome, with the face of a Romeo and the dreamy eyes of a poet — slender, graceful, smiling, giving the lie in every line to his dare-dog reputation. A marvel, a standing enigma. Ah, if only he, Sir Albery, had been like him ! If he had done something, been anything ! If there had been one thing to commend him beyond the dirty acres that he could lay at her feet. A captain of Fencibles — and even those he could not drill without help. Oh lord, how he had wasted his young years ! What was he ? A clod !

He turned from the picture with a sigh, and got to his horse. But, as he jogged over the turf beside the drive, the sun shone, and the trees were green, and when he looked back the many windows of the house twinkled at him cheerfully. And gradually his spirits rose. After all, he was Wyke of Upper Bere, he could make her my lady, and who

else was there who was more worthy of her ! He flipped his horse and made a playful cut with his whip at the smiling urchin who ran out to open the Lodge gate.

Unfortunately when he had ridden a hundred yards along the highway a magpie flew across his path and dashed his spirits. 'Oh, hang !' he muttered, following the pied one's flight with his eyes. 'One for sorrow ! Why does not Hawes keep the vermin down ?' He rode more soberly after that until he came abreast of the Grange, a spruce white house set in the middle of a lawn on the left of the road, with parterres before it, that old-fashioned people who had only reached the stage of shrubberies, sniffed at. And there, leaning on the gate, pretty much as if she expected someone to pass, stood Charlotte Bicester.

The girl nodded as he pulled up. 'You haven't been in for the last two days, have you ?' she asked. 'I haven't seen you.' Her face was serious and she seemed a little out of breath, but he was full of his own thoughts, and he did not notice this.

'Not for three days,' he answered, colouring slightly, he was so conscious of his errand. 'I've been from home. Do you want anything in Beremouth ?' Constantly passing, he sometimes did errands for the Grange.

'No, I think not,' Charlotte said doubtfully. 'But' — she paused, looking away from him down the road — 'you've heard no bad news, have you ?' She shot a sharp glance at him and as quickly averted her eyes.

'Bad news ?' He stroked his horse's neck with his whip — he had no suspicion. 'No, I've heard none.' Then, 'You don't mean of *The Peggy* ? You don't mean to say,' he continued, his voice rising, 'that she's taken ?'

'No.' Charlotte kept her eyes fixed on the road. 'Its not that. It's her namesake, poor — poor Peggy ! She has — Sir Albery, are you sure you haven't heard ? She has gone away.' Charlotte brought out the last words with an effort.

'No?' He was still in the dark. 'Miss Peggy? Is she from home?' His face betrayed his disappointment.

'She's gone off,' Charlotte said in a low voice, 'with — with Mr. Bligh, I am afraid.' This time she was determined that he should understand.

She expected him to cry out; to declare with an oath that it was a lie, that he did not believe it. But he did not say a word. He sat his horse in the sunshine, and just one shiver ran through him from head to heel, the sort of shiver that might run through a man struck by a bullet in a vital part.

'I only heard it this morning,' Charlotte continued hurriedly, her face working. 'She — she was missed the day before yesterday. And yesterday he — went away, I hear. I am afraid there is no doubt of it. It is known everywhere. And oh, oh! I am grieved.' The girl broke down and cried, letting her tears run openly down her face. In part it was the news that she was telling that moved her. But more, far more it was the man's stony silence, and the knowledge of what he was suffering. 'I am so — so grieved for her!' she sobbed.

He sat as still as before, gazing between his horse's ears. So grieved! She was so grieved! Grieved — when it meant nothing to her! He could have laughed aloud, laughed at the bitter absurdity of it. The sun had fallen from the sky, the earth heaved, all the devils of hell were loosed — and she grieved! It was only by a fierce effort that he refrained from that wild laughter.

After a long silence he spoke, and Charlotte was thankful to hear his voice. He knew the worst; the thing was told now, at any rate.

'Where are they — gone?' he asked huskily, yet in something like his ordinary voice.

She wiped her eyes, but she was still at pains not to look at him. 'I don't know,' she said. 'I believe that she went by the Saltash boat that touches at Plymouth. He left by the London coach, I am told — yesterday morning.'

'Then — they did not go together ?' he muttered.

'No, but — but I am afraid that they had arranged it.' She was unwilling to let him hope. 'I am afraid — I fear that it is certain.'

'Has — has her father done anything ?'

'No,' she said reluctantly. 'I think not.'

'He has not followed her ?'

'No. I'm afraid that he was too angry. He is not a forgiving man, you know — I don't think that he is, at least. Oh, poor, poor Peggy !' She broke down again. 'She is terribly to blame, I know. Terribly ! But ——'

'D — n him !' Wyke said the words softly to himself. Then he was silent for a long time — long at any rate it seemed to Charlotte. At last, 'You are sure that it is true ?' he muttered.

'I do fear so. Oh, I do fear so !' Charlotte exclaimed, her tears falling. 'I had noticed things, and — and I am told that there had been meetings. It seems to have been known to some. He was working at Budgen's, and it is said that the Rector got him dismissed from there and — and that drove them to it. At least my maid tells me that is what they are saying — in the town.'

Another pause, painful to Charlotte. Then, 'Thank you,' he said. 'I think I must be getting on now.'

'You are going there ?' she ventured.

'I must be sure,' he said. Without looking at her, without leave-taking, he touched his horse. He moved away down the road.

The girl, when he was gone, bowed her head on the gate, and cried. Her way of taking it would have surprised those who many a time had winced at her bluntness. But Charlotte was fond of Peggy. She understood, or thought that she understood the girl, her virtues and her failings, her wilfulness and her loyalty. Nor was that all. It was not only for Peggy and the hapless fate that she foresaw for her that Charlotte grieved. It was not to spare her that she had

imposed on herself a painful task, that she had voluntarily undergone ten of the horrible minutes of life. Some one had to break it to him. It was for him, to spare him, that she had suffered — she best knew why.

Not many minutes later on that morning Wyke entered the Rectory drawing-room, and found Augusta alone; and Augusta, seeing him, knew that another crisis lay before her. She rose to meet him, and as she put her cold hand into his, her manner was perfect. It combined humility and a sense of the wrong that had been done him with a sympathy that, too deep for words, shone in her eyes. Nor indeed was Augusta acting. She was honestly distressed. She had not foreseen the gravity of the thing or its appalling effect on her father, or she told herself that she would have acted otherwise on that morning three days past. Now, brought face to face with the man, she was moved, and she was clever enough to make no effort to conceal the fact. In one usually so calm the display was effective.

Unfortunately Wyke was not thinking of her, and the exhibition was wasted. 'What do you know?' he asked without preface and with a bluntness that, prepared as she was, took her aback. 'Tell me, please.' He sat with averted eyes and a face of stone while she told her tale.

'Had you no suspicion?'

'Of this, none! None, of course, Sir Albery. Can you ask me? But of the man — that she had some feeling for him — I fear I had. But I thought it was nothing — how could I think otherwise, knowing him? I thought that it was a foolish fancy that would pass. Young girls have them,' she added naïvely.

He passed over that as if she had not said it. 'What has your father done?' he demanded. His sternness and his brevity, not to say the chill in his tone, depressed her.

She told him reluctantly. 'He takes it very hardly,' she added. 'If I were in his place ——' She sighed and broke off. 'He thinks otherwise, however. He feels it to be

so terrible a disgrace to us all that she should leave us for a man so hopeless, so degraded, so low ! And in such a way, Sir Albery, without a word, without warning ! He cannot forgive her. I fear,' Augusta continued in a despondent tone, her head drooping over the work that she had mechanically taken up, 'I fear that he will do nothing. And without him — I cannot set myself against him — I am helpless.'

'He will not follow her ?'

'He thinks it too late. He thinks it useless. What we do know I had to learn myself. He would not — he is cut to the heart by her ingratitude, and — and deceit. Last evening — it was very dreadful — he took the large Bible and struck out her name. His anger was terrible. But perhaps you may persuade him. Let me tell him you are here ?'

'No !' Wyke spoke curtly. 'I'd rather not see him.' He rose to his feet.

'But you are not going ?' Augusta exclaimed in distress as well as surprise. She had anticipated a leisurely, melancholy talk, an exchange of sympathy, the event deplored, the stricken comforted. 'Oh, surely you will not desert us in our trouble,' she continued. 'I have not told you, I could not find words to tell you how grieved we are for you. How deeply we feel for you. But I am sure, I am sure that you —'

He appeared to have lost his manners as well as his mistress, for he cut her short. 'Thank you,' he said. 'Not now — I think I have learned all that is to be learned. You know no more than you have told me ?'

'No more, I fear.'

'Then I think I will be going,' he said. Yet when he had said it he paused. But his eyes did not meet Augusta's sorrowful look. They travelled round the room, the room in which he had last seen *her*, the room in which he had fallen under her spell, the room in which he had tasted a

happiness dashed for ever from his life. His face twitched. Then, with little more of leave-taking than he had spent on Charlotte half an hour before, he took himself off.

'Oh, dear, dear !' Augusta murmured, looking plaintively after him. For this, too, was a thing imagination had not pictured.

He did not have his hair cut — it is needless to say that. Nor did he buy the cast-nets that his gardener needed. He rode out of Beremouth, and many were the curious eyes that followed him as his horse slipped and scrambled and snorted on the cobbles of the steep narrow street with its unchanging smell of seaweed and fish. He rode deep in thought, and reaching his own gate drew rein and sat so long motionless in the saddle that the woman in the Lodge peeping at him through the window thought her master demented.

At last he struck the horse and, with a grim face, rode on along the road at a steady trot. He kept this up for three or four miles, then he slackened his speed. Seven miles on, at Ivy Bridge, he struck into the Plymouth and Exeter road. He turned to the right and by South Brent and Buckfastleigh pushed steadily on to Ashburton.

There he baited his horse, but ate nothing himself, spending the hour of waiting in pacing to and fro under the yews of the churchyard. The leafy combes and green hill-sides about Ashburton are notable: Devon holds no fairer scenery. But he was blind to their beauties. The task that he had set himself was a horror to him, but anything was better than inaction, anything more tolerable than thought, and he was glad when he could mount again. He rode through Chudleigh, easing his horse up the long toilsome ascent of Haldon Hill. From the Race Course he dropped rapidly down through Shillingford, and as the Exeter clock struck six he crossed Exe Bridge and rode wearily up Fore Street.

He stabled his horse at the London, bade the ostler have a care of it, and went into the house. There, his first demand was for the Plymouth paper of the day before. He

stood in the Coffee-room conning it carefully, and within five minutes had alighted on the item for which he was searching. 'On the seventh' — this was the ninth — 'from the Hamoaze for Bristol, the sloop of war *Antiope*, Captain Hindwell.'

'Bristol?' he muttered. 'I was right.' He rang for the waiter and ordered dinner. 'Is there a night coach for Bristol?' he inquired.

'Yes, sir, from the Devonshire Coach office,' the man told him. 'At nine.'

'Then send and book me an outside seat — at once. For to-night.'

The man sent the boots to book the seat. 'And make no mistake, mind,' he added. 'It's Sir Alberty Wyke, and he's in the devil of a temper. He's got a face on him — if aught goes wrong, my lad, I'd rather you than me!'

CHAPTER X

THE wind was southerly, the sun shone, and the Captain's gig, manned by a crew of eight, danced over the rippling flood-tide that ran a little turbid off the Pill. The middy, seated between the two women in the stern-sheets and proud of his convoy, handled the whitened rudder-lines with dignity, while the elder of the passengers, whose Irish eyes were as bright as the wavelets that plashed against the boat, flattered the boy and quizzed him by turns.

Not that she was lacking in feeling, or unconscious of the anxiety that wrung Peggy's heart and drove the blood from her cheeks, as in dumb suspense she strained her eyes towards the distant jetty. Mrs. Fagan was a kindly as well as a handsome woman. But things were as they were, the girl had taken her own course and must dree it, and though the sister of the *Antiope's* Captain did not blame her — she had too much Irish blood in her veins for that — she did not see that she could do more at the moment than divert the middy's attention from the girl's distress.

For neither the fairness of the morning, nor the sparkle on the water, nor the green shore that, beyond it, rose gently up to Durdham Downs could comfort Peggy's heart in this crisis. If he should not be there? If he should not be there to meet her, the girl thought; and the measured rhythm of the oars drummed the doubt again and again into her ears. If anything had happened — and she pictured a hundred accidents — to stay or delay him! So far the plan that he had made for her had worked to a marvel; it had made all tolerable and almost easy. True, the start in the cold morning hours and the lonely journey to Plymouth had tested even

her courage; and though she had hidden herself as well as she could among the crowd bound for the fair, she had not been able to hide from her thoughts, or to escape from the knowledge that she had taken her fate into her own hands and broken beyond mending every tie that bound her to her past life. But from the moment that she had stepped ashore at the Hoe, her trouble had been lightened. She had been welcomed, sheltered, cheered, and every hour had felt and owned, absent from her as he was, her lover's care for her. For he still had friends in the Service, as generous as they were ready for any frolic; and they had striven to convince the girl that there was nothing odd in her position, or unbecoming in what she was going to do. They, at any rate, believed in him, no matter what the world said; and if they saw a serious side to the scrape, they were careful to let no inkling of their knowledge appear.

But now — now that the hour was come when she must part from them and place herself in his hands — now when she must put his love to the final test, and when, even if he were there, the irrevocable step, the thought of which set her cheeks burning, must be taken — now when she must trust his honour for all, Peggy's courage sank low. If he met her coldly? If she read doubt and misgivings in his face? Or if he showed her less respect than formerly, or had not made all the arrangements that he had sworn to make, but had only some lame tale of hindrance or delay to tell her? What then?

Better were it, then, far better if the boat never reached the jetty that was beginning to take clear shape! Better one short painful struggle in the flood that swirled past the low gunwale!

With a blanched face and closed eyes Peggy prayed. From home, friends, reputation, from all that was familiar to her save him alone — and in this new relation he loomed strange and formidable — she had severed herself by her own act, her thoughtless, wilful act, as she saw it now. If anything

had happened to him — and her panic painted a hundred calamities — or if he were changed, if he were what those whom she had abandoned had held him to be — what then ?

But no ! So to think, so to fear, was to do him dishonour ! And yet so much hung upon the moment, so much on his reception of her that she quailed, she actually felt sick. Things that earlier had seemed clear and certain appeared in this moment of trial to wear another face. Her eyes were opened to her wilfulness, her selfishness, her determination to go her way ; ay, and to her inexperience and ignorance. She saw too late that they, the others, might have been right and she wrong. If so, if they were — in an agony of suspense she squeezed hand in hand.

And then again, if he were not there ? What was she to do ? What would become of her ?

A few seconds and that fear at any rate was dissipated. She saw him, his slender figure, his empty sleeve, his waving arm, conspicuous among the foremost of the little crowd that fringed the jetty. And as Peggy sighed in a very passion of relief, 'There's your man !' Mrs. Fagan cried. 'Do you see him, dear ?'

'There he is !' the middy echoed. 'There's your man, Miss Portnal !'

Her man ? Ay, she saw him — she had seen him before they had. But she was beyond speech. The gig sheered off, the middy cried 'In board ! Rowed of all !' they slipped deftly and smoothly alongside the landing. She was the nearest to the jetty, and as Bligh stooped and clasped her hand and with a quivering lip Peggy raised her brimming eyes to his, all her anxieties fell from her as a cloak that is put off, and her faith in him stood unaltered. He was not changed, he was not cold, his eyes met hers in worship. Her man ? Ay, her man, her own ! And she was his woman, ready to trust him, ready to suffer with him, ready to believe him against all the world, ready to place all that she had, herself, her name, her hopes in his hands.

He said but one thing as he lifted her ashore. 'My brave girl!' he murmured in her ear, and the words were dear to her. 'May I never forget this!'

A little bustle and some confusion followed. There was a mail to be landed, Bligh had to greet the midshipman, and to assist Mrs. Fagan to step ashore. He wrung the good lady's hand. 'A thousand thanks,' he said, and his heart was in his words, 'for your kindness to this dear girl. The *Antiope* is in the Road, I suppose.'

'She is, my lad, worse luck,' Mrs. Fagan replied briskly. 'For she goes out with the tide, and I must return at once. I have but five minutes, or Tommy will be mast-headed — just five minutes to wish you joy, Bligh!'

His face fell. 'Oh, but that is bad!' he said, taken aback. 'I counted on you to come with us and see her — that you would not leave her until ——'

'Until you were spliced? Just so, Bligh. But ——'

'By your leaves, sir!' A hand fell on Bligh's shoulder, a harsh voice broke in upon and interrupted their talk. Irritated as much by the action as by the words, Bligh wheeled about, while Peggy uttered a cry of dismay. Her face turned scarlet, and as quickly white. But her recoil was only instinctive, the next moment the girl grasped her lover's arm and hung upon him, heedless of the curious eyes that watched them.

It was Wyke. 'By your leave, sir,' he repeated sternly. 'Be good enough to step aside, if you please.'

To those who looked on, it seemed that Bligh hesitated. He was disconcerted, and an onlooker might have formed a poor opinion of his firmness. But Peggy did not hesitate. 'No!' she said. 'No! He does not.' The colour had left her face, but she did not take her hand from her lover's arm. She clung to him only the more closely, and the more openly.

Sir Alberty, waiting, cold and stern, his hat in his hand, averted his eyes. 'My business is not with the lady,' he said.

'My business is with you, sir. Be good enough to step aside with me.' A crowd, scenting mischief, had gathered behind him, hemming in the little group that stood beside the boat.

But Peggy recked nothing of the crowd. She thought only of her man, and she clung to him, while across him, her eyes that a moment before had dropped, shamed by Wyke's appearance, sparkled like an offended cat's. 'He shall not, sir,' she repeated. 'Say what you have to say before us both.'

Sir Albery did not look at her, but he persisted. 'I can only say what I have to say to him,' he said.

Bligh still wore the air of a man driven into a corner, and forced to an unwelcome decision, but he found his voice at last. 'Steady, my dear,' he said. 'Steady. It is nothing. I can satisfy him in two minutes. Do you stop with Mrs. Fagan — while I ——'

'No !' Peggy said, her eyes wide with fear. 'You shall not go !'

On that the middy thought it was time to interfere, and he put himself forward, as if he had measured six feet instead of four feet nine. 'What is all this ?' he asked roughly. 'What is it all about ?'

'Yes,' Mrs. Fagan chimed in with spirit. 'What does it mean, sir ? Faith and indeed I never put foot in this little island, but there's some unpleasantness ! For shame sir !' she continued, a heightened colour in her face. 'If you must quarrel, there is a time for everything, and sure, a man's wedding-day is not the day a gentleman chooses to fix a quarrel on him.'

Bligh laughed, but there was little mirth in the sound. 'It's no quarrel, Mrs. Fagan,' he said. 'It is only an old friend of Peggy's, and I can satisfy him with a word. I must go, my dear,' he continued, laying a reassuring hand on the girl's shoulder and patting it. 'There's nothing else for it. I must indeed. But we shall not be out of your sight; no harm can happen to me. Trust me, dear, it is nothing !'

She tried to keep him, but he put her from him with gentle force, and joined Wyke. The two pushed their way through the knot of onlookers until they stood clear of the crowd. 'I suppose it is the usual thing,' Bligh said, confronting the other, his eyes bright with anger. 'You have followed us and found us. But you are neither her father nor her brother, and I'm d — d if I see what right you have to interfere. However,' he shrugged his shoulders, 'if you want satisfaction, you must have it, I suppose. But I warn you, it's ill work cornering a man on his wedding-day, and until I'm wedded I'll not meet you !'

Sir Albery measured him with cold eyes, but he kept his voice low. 'For shame, sir,' he said. 'For shame ! Satisfaction ? Do you forget, Mr. Bligh, that you have forfeited the right to give it ? That from the time when that young lady put her honour in your hands your life was no longer yours to risk ? For shame, sir !'

Bligh's face betrayed his relief. But a man does not like to be proved in the wrong, or to be shown to be less thoughtful for his own than another, and he covered his discomfiture under a show of rudeness. 'Then what do you want ?' he asked roughly. 'If you don't want to fight what the devil do you want ?'

'Do you marry her to-day ?'

'And if I do ?'

'At what hour ? If you are a gentleman, you will tell me. And where ? But no matter !' Wyke broke off, as if something in the other's manner or his slowness in replying had altered his mind. 'You need not tell me, for I warn you that wherever you go and wherever you take that lady, I shall not leave you for one moment until she is your wife. I shall not stir from your side, sir, until you have made your promise good. You may be honest or you may be a knave, Mr. Bligh, but she shall not be left with you. She thinks no evil, she has no fears, and no suspicions. And, by heaven' — his voice rose with the first show of heat that he had be-

trayed — 'there shall be no talk of her, and no ground for it ! There shall not be a tongue to wag against her, as God sees me !'

Bligh's colour rose. He looked at the other with a touch of shamed surprise. 'So that is what you want ?' he muttered. He passed his hand across his lips, which were not quite steady. 'You have followed us for that. Well,' with a forced laugh that failed to disguise his feeling, 'then the least I can say is that you are welcome. I may have wronged her in taking her from her home — perhaps I have, the event will prove. But I am no villain, or I should be the blackest of villains. We are to be married at eleven at All Saints' in Corn Street. I have the licence here, and you can see it if you please. Come with us by all means. And, at any rate, do me justice in this, Sir Albergy. The friend who is with her now has been with her day and night since she reached Plymouth, and would have seen her married to-day — but for an accident.'

'I will take her place,' Wyke replied coldly. 'With your permission I will speak to that lady.'

He led the way back to the place where the little party stood in anxious expectation beside the boat. He passed Peggy without a look, though her blanched face and frightened eyes must have softened him had he glanced at her. With a formal bow he addressed himself to Mrs. Fagan. 'I represent Miss Portnal's friends,' he said gravely. 'You may safely leave her in my care, Madam. I shall not quit her until the marriage has been performed.'

Peggy's face turned scarlet. 'There is no need !' she cried.

But Wyke continued to address Mrs. Fagan as if the girl had not spoken. 'I think I have made myself clear, Madam,' he said. 'You may depend upon me.' Then, stepping back, he made way for Bligh to return to his friends.

There was a little confusion about them as the two women embraced and parted, a little bustle, tears on both sides. Peggy hung on her friend as if she could not bear to relin-

quish her, until the midday, aware that the boat had already been detained beyond her time, and that the *Antiope* was signalling, hastened the departure. He wrung Peggy's hand — the boy had been her slave for forty-eight hours — bashfully wished her joy, and sprang into the stern-sheets. Mrs. Fagan was handed in, the bows were pushed off, the oars fell to a sharp order, and the boat slid away from the jetty, rising and falling on the ripple. By the time Peggy's eyes were dry enough to follow its course, it showed but as a long black insect crawling with many legs over the shining surface.

The moment had its significance for the two who, side by side, their fates already as good as joined, watched the receding boat. Hers was the more hopeful and the more buoyant nature. Trouble had not touched her, nor experience taught its grim lesson. Yet even in her, though she had her lover beside her, some spasm of fear must have stirred; or the presence of that other man who stood a few paces from the two, gazing with hard-set face across the water, may have touched an unwelcome chord reminding her of the home on which she had turned her back and the irrevocable step that she was about to take. For she shivered. For a minute, her girlishness fallen from her, she stood abashed.

Then with a sigh she turned to the man and put her hand in his hand. 'What did he want?' she murmured. Wyke was standing out of ear-shot.

He reassured her. 'No harm, dear,' he said cheerfully, and he told her.

Her cheeks flamed afresh. 'He need not have doubted you!' she exclaimed.

'No, dear. But it is as well he is here. Come!' He took up Peggy's bag, her poor light luggage, and stepped towards Wyke. 'I have a hackney coach at the end of the jetty,' he said.

Wyke turned without speaking, made a sign to them to go first, and with the same stern face followed them to the

coach. Bligh handed Peggy in, and by a gesture invited the other to follow.

But Wyke shook his head. 'I need not embarrass you,' he said drily. He mounted to the box-seat. Bligh, grateful for his decision, stepped in, the driver whipped up the horses, and the strange wedding-party jogged away down the road that led to the crowded and noisy streets of Bristol.

Once in movement and alone with the girl Bligh saw the absurd side of the situation, and he laughed. But the impulse passed as quickly and left him grave. Peggy sat beside him, Peggy who had risked so much for him, had given so generously, had borne so many days of suspense and anxiety, and his heart overflowed, and not with love only, nor with passion, though an hour would make her his wife; rather, to his credit be it said, with awe and tenderness, and a gratitude which appealed to the best that was in him. He did not say much, and when he had kissed her — for he felt her tremble against him — he refrained from caresses. But by the steady pressure of the hand that clasped hers he made her — and himself — a hundred silent promises. He knew his faults. He knew that in his darker hours he was sombre and absent, at times morose and stubborn and prone to discontent. He knew that, compared with his father, he was ill to lead, and ever too mindful of the wrongs that he had suffered. But in this hour, with her hand in his, he rose above himself. Mutely he vowed to be tender to her, to protect her, to be thoughtful for her; to conquer his worst self for her sake. The very presence of the man who sat outside the coach reminded him of all that she had given up for him, and of how different her lot might have been had she chosen.

And when presently, a little oppressed by his silence, she asked him timidly if anything was the matter — and added, turning her trustful eyes upon him, 'You won't — you won't keep anything from me, dear?' he answered with words that he had not foreseen.

'Nothing, Peggy,' he said. 'I will keep nothing from you — now or ever. But in an hour it will be too late to reflect; and I want you to think while there is time to turn back, dear. You may not have thought — you may not have thought enough, at any rate — of what is before you. Of what you are wedding, Peggy — poverty, hardship, reproach, the slights of friends, and — and God knows what besides.' His voice broke a little on his last words. But he went on, resolutely turning his eyes from the tender ones that dwelt on his face and strove to read his heart. 'For it is not too late. Even now, it is not too late, if you feel the slightest doubt — or fear. Your good name is safe, you understand that? That man outside — he is a better man than I am, Peggy — has seen to that. Yes, a better man. For you know what I am, dear, and if you take me, God knows what risks you run of want and sorrow, what part in disgrace, what share in misfortune may be yours. If you take me ——'

She laid her hand on his lips, and her voice, as she answered him, was deep with feeling. 'I take you, knowing all and thinking myself happy,' she told him. 'You know that I do, Charles. For better, for worse, dear, in sickness and health, till death part us. Where you go I will go, and where you lodge I will lodge, and your people shall be my people and — and your will my will.'

She broke down there, and the tears ran down her face. He drew her to him. He had no power to answer her.

CHAPTER XI

THE elopement made a great, a far-reaching, an astounding noise. Dr. Portnal was so much more than Rector of Beremouth, so much more than a mere country parson, he had so long held his head high at Quarter Sessions and County Meetings, that the echoes of his mishap were not confined to his own neighbourhood. They spread far. They startled Tavistock, they surprised Dartmouth, they were heard even in the Close at Exeter. In country houses and parsonages from the one end of Devon to the other men chuckled over the story, while women lifted their hands and asked 'What next?' And, this being an envious world, wherein good fortune is seldom popular and wisdom, proclaimed in the market-place, is welcome to a fall, it was hard to say whether the scandal was acclaimed with more wonder or more amusement. 'The little baggage!' the men said with a grin. 'And Lord, Lord! Portnal of all people! I'd have given a guinea to see his face when he missed her!' Their wives declared the affair disgraceful and the girl a hussy, vowed that men were blind, and that they would have seen it themselves with half an eye. Next day they remembered that they had always predicted it.

But face to face with the Rector few ventured to broach the subject, and a group still smaller to offer condolence. He carried it off well, even his critics had to admit that. To those who hazarded a word he turned a bleak face. In the coldest of accents, 'I am much obliged to you,' he would reply, 'but I prefer not to speak of it. My daughter has made her bed and must lie on it, but that is now her affair,

not mine.' No one presumed to carry the matter farther.

Yet, great as was the sensation in the country and among the Portnal's intimates, it was nothing to the excitement that the news created in Beremouth, where the Rector reigned supreme. It happened that the prolonged absence of the privateer had been, during the week before, in all mouths. She had overstayed the time for which she was victualled, no word had come in from her, and along the water-side, in the Privateersman, and in the snug of the Keppel Head, men of experience began to shake their heads. Old salts whispered in corners that she had gone the way of the *Pride*. Their eyes followed Budgen as he slouched with humped shoulders across the wharf to his boat. They muttered that Ozias, who for two years past had declared each cruise to be his last, had risked it once too often. Worst sign of all, they lied with astonishing freedom and profanity when they were attacked by tearful wives and frightened mothers.

'She ha' been driven into the 'lantic, I tell 'ee !' they swore. 'Ha'nt ye seen the winds ? What doo 'ee expect !' Or, 'Never fear, mother ! Like enough she've gone up the Straits for beef or water, and is wind-bound off Tetuan ! A fortnit ? What's a fortnit at sea ? Ha' you never heard tell o' Christian, as was forty-seven days out o' Spithead for the Bermudies, and never no nearer to the Bermudies than Spithead when he anchored ? Lord love 'e, there's no such thing as time at sea !'

In spite of these assurances, and the oaths that backed them, the alarm was general, and would have been greater had more people had a stake in the venture. But when the news of the elopement of the Rector's daughter with young Bligh broke upon the astonished town, the other *Peggy* was for whole days forgotten, or if remembered, was named only in some humorous connexion with the errant maid. 'Seem-in'ly there be two Lively Peggies !' the wits said, grinning broadly, 'and both amissing ! And that young chap ! Lord ha' mercy, bold as brass he mun be to carry off the

Rector's daughter, and him in Budgen's yard but yesterday! She mun be a pretty spanking piece too!' There was no end to the sniggering and to jokes about hugging with one arm — jokes not always of the most delicate.

Even Budgen put off for a few hours his face of settled gloom, and was heard to chuckle over his books. Apparently he also opened his purse, for Joe Fewster, who had been cadging drinks for a month past and swearing with maudlin tears that he would go for a soldier, had once more shillings in his pocket, and bragged in his cups of the good time that was coming.

Naturally the women's sympathy was with the young couple. 'The Rector be a hard one!' they agreed, as they gossiped on door-steps and marvelled how he would take it and what he would do. They were of one mind, that he'd never forgive her, not he — such a come-down and him that proud! But mainly they wondered whether the erring pair would be seen again in Beremouth. The common view was that they would not dare to show themselves. It was rumoured that old Bligh was packing, that he was going, some even swore that they had seen him go.

The news became known on a Monday. By Thursday, even as the most violent fevers are the shortest, it had been fairly talked out, and anxiety about the safety of the *Lively Peggy* had regained its place. But with Sunday a desire to see how the Rector took the matter, and whether it had altered him, restored the affair to momentary importance. The knots of people who dotted the winding ascent to the church, and hastened their steps as the last bell quickened its measure, were both larger and more lively than usual. There were, indeed, some who declined to be tempted, alleging that his reverence would not appear, for there were Sundays when he honoured Ipe or Chiddingfold by reading the lessons, or in a stately manner preaching to an awed congregation.

But for those who flocked late up the road and laughed

and chattered as they went, misgivings on this score were quickly allayed. They had a glimpse of the Rector passing across the churchyard, and as they trooped in, they whispered the news to others. It travelled from pew to pew and every eye was on the alert when the bell stopped, the fiddlers and hautboys in the gallery ceased to tune up, and the usual procession emerged from the vestry. The Rector, preceded by the clerk and his curate, moved to his place, while every eye devoured him.

Alas, he looked much as usual. A little colder, a little prouder, a little more remote, perhaps. Here and there an infrequent worshipper felt that he had made a costly effort for a small return.

Yet, no. As the thought saddened these, and the pale-faced curate rose to give out the opening hymn, a thrill ran through the congregation. A well-known sound caught every ear. It was the tap-tap of old Bligh's wooden leg on the flags of the aisle. And he was not alone, as the majority — for nearly all turned at the sound — were quick to discern. Moving up the aisle before him and walking side by side came Charles Bligh and his bride. The bridegroom stared before him; he tried his best to appear indifferent, though he did not quite succeed. But Peggy? Who can describe the mingling of pride and bashfulness that clothed her, as blushing and with eyes cast down, she advanced leaning on her husband's arm! There was a modest dignity in her mien, a courage free from challenge in her bearing that, as she passed up with parted lips, breathing a little quickly, won many a heart.

It was a sight that rewarded the laziest and would have drawn the most rabid Wesleyan to church. When the three reached old Bligh's humble pew, that yet, the church being larger than the population, was pretty far forward, and entering one by one, knelt down, a gasp that was almost a murmur stirred the dead air. Unfortunately, to look at the same time at the couple and at the Rector was impossible, and the

most curious had to imagine the wrath that raged behind his impassive face. The curate did imagine this — so clearly and so powerfully that he lost his nerve, and remained silent until the party knelt down. Then, feeling Dr. Portnal's cold eye upon him — and very cold it was — he gave out the hymn in a flurry that made matters worse.

Thankful were the rearmost that they sat where they did. They had the whole show before them. They could stare at will, yet maintain an air of devotion. They could feed their eyes on the bride's Dunstable straw, her blushing cheek, on the ringlet that fell behind her ear, the tippet that covered her dainty shoulders. They could nudge one another when Peggy, finding the place for her one-armed husband, read from his book. Or, sated with this, they could look a little farther to the front, search the Rector's set face, imagine the anger he controlled, and picture his stupefaction at seeing himself thus bearded. Returning to their former target, they could review the Captain's half-pay neatness, and strive to determine whether he were elated or appalled.

The treat lightened vastly the weary succession of Prayers and Litany and Decalogue. When the Fifth Commandment was read, cunning ears caught the falter in the curate's voice, and sly eyes watched the errant couple to see if the injunction came home to them. Happy, happy people, storing up for a future generation the events of a remarkable day! What to them was the Armed Neutrality, or the Continental System, or the Rise of the First Consul?

They who sat in the front lacked some of these pleasures, but had their compensations. They had the chancel before them and the great ones who sat in it; Augusta in the pew which she had shared so many times with her sister, Lady Bicester and Charlotte seated opposite her, in the Manor pew Sir Alberty. They were all there, and the first and the last had more than their share of attention. Augusta behaved as became her — she would. After a few seconds of panic, she dropped her eyes on her book and, calm and statu-

esque, gave herself to devotion. Charlotte should have followed her example, but did not rise to it. She coloured and leant forward, her lips parted, her eyes dewy with feeling. Then her mother touched her, and she remembered herself.

Of them all, however, it was Wyke who came in for the closest scrutiny and on whom the more astute bent their gaze. But he refused to see. He looked graver than usual, and he refrained from looking down the church. But he masked his chagrin, if he felt it, so well that little was to be gained by staring at him, and some inferred that, after all, it was Augusta whom he had courted.

There was a stir when Dr. Portnal withdrew to change his surplice for his black gown and, scandal had it, to take a glass of port. Some anticipated that he would preach against the sin of disobedience; a few, skilled in St. Paul's writings, even foresaw the text. But though his voice was a little colder than usual, his matter was as dry and *jeune* and his manner as colourless as on other Sundays: in a word, he expounded a doctrinal point with the dispassionate authority that became his position. Nevertheless the sermon was less tedious than ordinary, because his hearers had something to expect. Had not the young couple still to pass out, and everyone to decide whether he would keep his seat till the show was over, or hasten forth to seize a post of vantage in the churchyard?

But more than these happy people supposed was in store for them. The Rector had given the blessing — it sounded like a denunciation — and some, anxious to seize the best places outside, were rising to their feet when the thing happened. With the soft shuffling of the first to move blended a strange, and untimely sound. The ropes in the tower began to rattle through their bearings. Men already on the move looked up, and suddenly, high above the listeners' heads, there burst forth a merry, a triumphant peal. Those who stood stared in wonder, those who still knelt sought their neighbours' eyes. One thought possessed all—wedding-

bells ! But who had dared ? The boldest could not believe their ears, the timid wilted, while louder and quicker, swung to their full measure, the joy-bells shook the sturdy Norman tower, beat their heavy music down upon the trembling church, flung it far and wide over the startled town, the shining sea, the winding vale.

What did it mean ? The foremost pressed towards the entrance, those on their knees scrambled to their feet. Suddenly the western doors swung inward, and between them the figure of an old man, dark against the sunlight, was seen gesticulating. Forgetful of decorum and of everything but his news, he raised a quavering voice that yet made itself heard. 'She's in ! She's in, lads !' he shouted. 'A prize, lads ! A prize !'

No more thought of bride and bridegroom ! No more reflections on the Rector's displeasure ! The *Peggy* was in, and she had taken. Men bawled the tidings in one another's ears. 'A prize, man, a prize !' Somewhere amid the hubbub a woman broke into weeping. Another cried audibly 'The Lord be praised !' And struggling and shouldering one another, gabbling, laughing, exclaiming, the congregation pressed towards the doorway. Those who reached it first — and they were the boys — raced round the church to the walk that overlooked the sea. The rest followed, crossing graves without a thought, stumbling, hurrying, bawling. Within two minutes every man, woman, and child was ranged along the east wall of the churchyard, waving hats and cheering, as the scene below burst upon their view and confirmed the tale.

The *Lively Peggy* — and never had she sat the water more buoyantly, never had her graceful lines done old Budgen's skill more credit — was still the better part of a league from land. But moment by moment she glided nearer, her courses and topsails set to catch the light breeze, her flags flying gaily at peak and bowsprit. Hearts swelled at the sight. The crowd cheered and cheered again, as she slid on —

surely one of the most beautiful of man's creations, a brig under sail. But it was not so much at her — after a single fond look of appreciation — that the men for the most part gazed. A cable's length behind her, with the Union flag flying above the tricolour, a brig that looked twice the *Peggy's* burden sailed in her wake, and as experienced eyes measured her and gauged her beam, men clapped one another on the back, and swore and stamped their feet in triumph. Here was a proud day for Beremouth! Old salts cursed Ozias in quaint affectionate phrases, and even Budgen seemed for the moment a thing of beauty, a benefactor, the town's worthy son!

'She be a hundred and twenty if she be five,' swore an old hand, eyeing the prize with envy. 'And out of Nantes by the lines of her! Ay, she be a beauty!'

'And brandy!' cried another. 'I do know by the look of her! Right stuff, and hogsheads and hogsheads of it. Well done, Ozias, d—n his eyes! He's the Devon lad's Ozias!'

'D'ye see her splinters!' shouted a third, and seized and shook his neighbour to gain his attention. 'D'ye see the white wood? Why, I can see it this far off, you blind fool. They've had to fight for her! Please God she ha'n't cost lives!'

Again the deep cheering of the men ran along the wall as the *Peggy* fired a gun, and bowing gracefully to the breeze began to go about, that she might heave to, half a mile from the Cove where was deep water. Ashore were laughing and weeping, both; and above both the deep voices of the bells flung the joyful news across the smiling countryside. Men, satisfied that they could now be seen from the decks, waved their hats, women their kerchiefs, and many, carried away by their enthusiasm, climbed on the giddy eminence of the wall and there danced and shouted, while their wives gripped their coat-tails and prayed them to come down.

'Good old Ozias ! Good old Ozias !' they yelled, thinking to make themselves heard across six furlongs of air and sea.

No thought of bride and bridegroom now, though doubtless they were somewhere in the throng. And no thought of the Rector save that he would be pleased, for his concern in the venture was known. 'Budgen will be drunk tonight,' said one. 'And by G — d we'll all be drunk ! Can you spell her name, Joe ?'

The speaker addressed one who had miraculously produced a glass. 'Ay, ay, *La-la Bel-dam*, I read it, whatever it means. Lord, what a lingo ! Seems all swearing. But you be right, lad. There's brandy in her for sure. She've the lines of it.'

The crowd began to break away, the leaders hurrying across the churchyard towards the stairs and the path that led to the Cove. The main body followed, hot-foot and eager to meet the first boat that came off and to learn the facts. But here and there among those who ran, might be seen an anxious face and scared eyes, for after all the news might be sad news for some. There might be empty bunks and missing numbers, and presently the sound of weeping in humble dwellings by the quay. There might be those who had gone out who had not returned and would never again prop themselves in the sunshine against the capstans on the jetty or go out with the fishing boats at dawn. But still — a prize ! And a prize meant money to spend and to scatter and to drink, a nest-egg against the coming of winter, shoes for children, finery for girls ! It meant a small fortune for some, and leavings for many, and easy times in the little port.

So, though here and there a woman ran, panting and sick with fear, or an old man covered his mouth with his hand that it might not be seen to twitch, the bells still pealed merrily overhead, and many took up the chorus of 'God bless Great George our King !' that the clerk started. Scrambling, running, falling, Beremouth streamed down to the Cove, in-

vaded Budgen's sheds, thrust Budgen himself from hand to hand, smote him on the back, shouted congratulations in his ears, cursed him drolly, stared with eager eyes to where the *Peggy* was coming up to her moorings. She dipped her ensign in salute. A boat left her quarter.

CHAPTER XII

AND do you come with me,' Charlotte Bicester urged, as she turned to Augusta.

But Augusta only raised her eyebrows. 'You are ridiculous,' she said. 'If you thought before you spoke, Charlotte, you would know that without my father's permission, I cannot.'

'Then go to him and get it !'

'Impossible, my dear. Sir Albery must see that it is.'

The three, abandoned by the ebb of the crowd, stood in the angle of the churchyard wall that overlooked the Cove. They could see, below them, the *Peggy* and her capture, and hear the rattle of the anchor-chain of the latter as it slid through the hawse-hole. The murmur of the people in the Cove rose to them through the sunlit air, and overhead the bells rocked joyously. But for the last three minutes their thoughts had turned to another and, to them, a graver matter.

If Wyke, silent and reserved, had an opinion, he had no mind to give it. But Charlotte, who had forgotten in her enthusiasm his interest in the matter, persisted. 'Well, I shall go,' she declared.

'Then I think you have neither sense nor delicacy,' Augusta retorted. 'But I do not believe that you mean it. Depend upon it, if you do, you will hear of it from your mother.'

'That is between my mother and me,' Charlotte replied with spirit. 'After all, my dear, here they are, and here I suppose they will stay. At any rate I know nothing to the

contrary. And is no one to go near them? Peggy has — has not behaved well,' she admitted, remembering too late Sir Albery's position, while her rising colour betrayed her embarrassment. 'But she has not run away with a man without marrying him. She has married without her father's consent, and married beneath her. And I don't say that — that she is not to be blamed,' she added, feeling Sir Albery's eyes upon her. 'I admit it. But that is not my affair. I have no doubt that she has been to see you, Augusta?'

'I did not see her.'

'Well, I think you ought to! Of course I think you ought to! When you meet her in the street do you mean to pass her by? Are you going to ignore your own sister?'

'I shall obey my father,' Augusta replied, confident that Sir Albery must agree with her. 'He feels my sister's desertion so deeply, that if I, too, am to disobey him, and to take sides against him — No, I cannot and I will not,' Augusta repeated with energy. 'I am not heartless, though you may think me so, Charlotte. But my first duty is to my father. My sister has been guilty of most cruel conduct. She left us without a word of warning, or one reason given. She has preferred to us, and to her duty, a man of bad name and disgraceful character. You cannot deny it, and how can you expect my father to overlook it? Or that I should side with her against him, and add a fresh blow to one that has wounded him so deeply?'

'I think that Miss Portnal is right,' Wyke agreed. 'Her position is difficult.' He thought that the Bicester girl might have spared him this.

'Well,' Charlotte admitted. 'There is something in that. Until your father relents I allow that you cannot. But if I were in your place I'd see that he relented pretty quickly, my dear. I should not rest an hour until I had persuaded him.'

Augusta shrugged her shoulders. 'You talk like a child,' she said. 'Time may do much. But I know my father, and that to argue with him now, would only make things worse.'

Wyke nodded. 'I think Miss Portnal is right,' he said. He was suffering though he did not show it, and he was vexed with Charlotte for putting him on the rack: it was thoughtless, it was obtuse of the girl. And Charlotte knew this, and could have bitten out her tongue for her folly. But Augusta never failed to rub her the wrong way, and even now, though she knew that she ought to drop the matter, she could not. 'Well, at any rate,' she said, 'I am free to take my own course, and I shall. I shall go and see them now.'

'If you take my advice you will do nothing of the kind,' Augusta rejoined, thinking what a fool Charlotte was making of herself. 'In my opinion you will be far from welcome. They will only think that you come out of curiosity, and every moment that you spend with Peggy will be a moment of humiliation to her. If her eyes are not already open to her folly I am much mistaken; and I know this at least, my dear, that if I had done what she has done, my one desire would be to hide myself.'

But Charlotte was obstinate. 'Well,' she said, 'we shall see. I think I know her better than you do, though she is your sister.'

Augusta turned to Sir Albery: 'I won't ask you to come in to-day,' she said. Her tone implied that she, at any rate, had some tact and delicacy.

'No,' he said. 'I fear that there may be bad news for some.' He indicated the crowd below by a gesture. 'I may be of use.'

After another word or two they parted. Augusta turned towards the rectory, Wyke took the road to the town, while Charlotte made for the path that descended to the Cove.

She went, but not in a happy mood. She knew that her feelings had run away with her, and she regretted much that she had said. But she had gone too far to retreat, and though she dreaded what her mother would say, she went on. She had heard such unpleasant things of the old Cap-

tain, that she was prepared to be shocked by him. He might not be sober, and for his home — well ! For the younger man she had taken up the cudgels more than once; to take up the cudgels for the weak was a thing to which Charlotte was prone. But she had never regarded him as an equal, and her sympathy had its spice of condescension. His dismissal from the Navy was bad, and this last escapade, which convicted him of a selfishness that it was hard for one who loved Peggy to forgive, was worse. For Peggy, her youth, her innocence, and her inexperience, all spoke — but all indicted him. His temptation might have been great, but he could not be acquitted of dragging down the girl whom he professed to love. To what a level he had dragged her Charlotte trembled to think — and was now to discover.

As she turned the last corner, and came in sight of the cottage that Peggy — Peggy, the spoiled, the wilful, the mischievous, who might have reigned at Upper Bere — now called her home Charlotte's feet lagged. She took in at a glance its thatched roof and whitewashed walls — in her eyes it was little better than a hovel — and she faltered in her purpose. Then, Charlotte-like, she told herself that the worse the conditions the greater the need of friends, and she determined that she would not be shocked. She went on bravely, she pushed the gate open and tapped at the door.

Nothing happened. 'They are not in,' Charlotte thought, and she came near to hoping that they might not be. 'They may be down at the Cove,' she reflected. Still she rapped again. At any rate she would do her part.

A light step, pattering down bare stairs, dispelled the hope, if hope it was. The door opened, and Peggy appeared on the threshold. When she saw who it was she blushed — blushed to her very tucker as their eyes met.

'Oh, Peggy !' Charlotte said, and that was all. The words conveyed a hundred things.

'You dear !' Peggy replied, and the next instant the two girls were in one another's arms. 'You dear ! You dear !'

Peggy repeated, hugging her friend. 'Then you have not cast me off !'

'Silly !' Charlotte said, her doubts and her fears forgotten. 'Why, I have come to call, and I haven't lost time, you see. May I come in ?'

'If you are not afraid !' Peggy rejoined, between laughter and tears. 'Come in, my dear ! Come in ! I am quite alone. Charles and his father are at the Cove. Charles thought that he might be of use. But they may be back at any moment.'

Charlotte tried to look about her as she entered as if she did not look. But she saw and was relieved. Poor, plain, and bare the room was, with its white-washed walls and brick floor. But it was neither sordid nor ugly, it was clean as a pink, and tidy as sailors cribbed in a tiny space learn to keep a cabin. The knives on the small round table, laid for dinner, were horn-handled, the forks two-pronged, but the coarse cloth was clean and a mug of wild-flowers set off the whole. The Byzantine enamel blended indifferently with the wooden chairs and the shells on the mantel-shelf, but it made a spot of colour on the wall, and the sword slung above the fireplace added a note of dignity. Even for the carpenter's bench in the corner neatness pleaded.

Relieved, Charlotte hugged Peggy again. 'You naughty, naughty girl !'

'Woman, miss, if you please !' Peggy rejoined, colouring and laughing. Then, 'Dear Charlotte ! To come and see me, and so soon !'

'But, oh, Peggy, what a thing you've done !' Charlotte exclaimed. They were both a little embarrassed now that the first greeting was past. 'What a reckless, reckless thing, my dear ! And what a talk you have caused !'

'And I don't repent it — that !' Peggy cried, snapping her fingers, and then to hide her confusion she hid her face on Charlotte's shoulder.

'Well, I know I ought to scold you,' Charlotte replied.

'So you must consider yourself scolded, Peggy, but ——'

'But here is my excuse!' And the one thing that the other most dreaded happened. A form darkened the doorway, and Charles Bligh entered, followed by his father. The moment was a trying moment for more than one; the old Captain seemed to grow actually smaller at sight of the visitor, while Charlotte was a little out of countenance herself. It was Charles who saved the situation. He stepped forward with an assurance that the girl thought over-done, but then his part was not easy to play. 'This is kind of you, Miss Bicester,' he said. 'You have come to see Peggy. I think you know my father? We have been down at the Cove. It was a fine piece of luck for us that the brig came in this morning.'

'Why?' Charlotte asked, somewhat at sea. 'Have you an interest in her?'

He smiled. 'In her, no. But in anything that gives Beremouth something to talk about — a great interest!'

'I see,' Charlotte said, a little awkwardly. 'Of course.'

'It's a good prize,' he resumed, deftly turning the conversation from themselves. 'A really good prize, deep-laden, and brandy mainly. But they will be wise if they shift what are left of the French crew out of her. There will not be one man in five sober in Beremouth to-night, and anything may happen. Never trust a Frenchman, Miss Bicester.'

'You have had experience?' Charlotte was beginning to feel more at her ease.

'Well, I suppose we should do the same, given the chance. But I've said a word to Budgen, and he will see to it, no doubt.' He turned to Peggy and, with a coolness that took her friend's breath away, 'Perhaps, if you put it very nicely, Peggy,' he said, 'Miss Bicester would honour us by being our first guest? It is Sunday' — he looked drolly at Charlotte — 'and not a Banyan day, as we sailors say. So we are not afraid to ask you.'

'Oh, Charlotte, do !' Peggy cried, colouring with pleasure. 'Say you will. Please do.'

It was the last thing that Charlotte had dreamed of doing and she would have given much to escape, for to comply was to sink into deeper trouble at home. But she had no excuse ready, she felt her cheeks grow hot under the young man's shrewd eyes, and while she hesitated Peggy's pleading look prevailed, she took the leap, and was lost. 'You are very good,' she said. Slowly she began to take off her gloves.

'Then it is time that my father and I dished up,' Charles replied, as if this were the most usual thing in the world. 'A soldier and a sailor are equal to most jobs, Miss Bicester, but you will see what comes of it. My father takes the potatoes and gravy, and I am answerable for the shoulder of mutton. Peggy ——'

'Lays the table,' Peggy chimed in, as gay as a lark. 'And is under-cook — a learner !'

'But is off duty to-day. Come, father,' Charles laid his hand affectionately on the Captain's shoulder, 'let us show Miss Bicester what two seasoned hands can do.'

He carried it off so well that when the two girls were left alone Charlotte laughed. She cast aside disguise. 'Peggy, Peggy !' she said. 'Your young man is too clever for me ! But how I shall catch it at home.'

'But isn't he a dear ?'

'A clever dear ? He is indeed. Too much for me. But I shall beware of him another time. I begin to understand, Peggy.'

'What ? What do you understand ?'

'How he won his wife,' Charlotte said. She let her eyes rove round the room. 'Who works at the bench ?'

'Captain Bligh. He makes models of ships, and Charles rigs them. And they sell them at Plymouth, for thirty shillings apiece, the large ones. I am to sew the sails, and read to them while they work. But, oh, my dear,' Peggy con-

tinued, her face growing serious, 'how am I to get my clothes?'

'From home?'

'Yes. You see, Charles went to the Rectory as soon as we returned — he would not let me; he said it was for him to bear the brunt. But they would not see him. Then he let me go. I was dreadfully frightened, but he said it was for us to make it up if we could. But Augusta would not see me, and he will not let me do any more. He says we must leave it to time.' Peggy's face was grave enough now. 'Only you see I have no clothes, and I cannot afford to buy new ones.'

Charlotte considered. 'I think I should write to Augusta and ask her to have them packed and sent to you.'

'I might do that. I must, I suppose. But' — she put her hand shyly into Charlotte's — 'it is better than you expected, dear, isn't it?' she pleaded.

'Ever so much better,' Charlotte answered. 'How two men can be so neat and keep everything in its place I cannot imagine!'

'It's habit, they say. But if you knew them, you would understand.' Then, 'It's a dear little place,' she cried, suddenly glowing. 'You must not suppose that I think I am to be pitied. I am not.'

'No,' Charlotte replied gravely, 'and I hope you never may be. But — it is early days yet, my dear.'

'Troubles will come, you mean? That is what Charles says. But as long as I have him and we have enough to eat — do you know what we are most afraid of? Charles does not hide anything from me.'

'No — what is it, my dear?'

'That Sir Albery will discharge Captain Bligh. But I don't think he will. He is too good. You know that he was at our wedding?'

Charlotte sat up as if a pin had pricked her. 'At your

wedding?' she gasped. 'Who do you say was at your wedding?'

'Sir Albercy.'

'Impossible!'

'But he was, Charlotte. He really was, though I don't think he wishes it to be spoken of.'

Charlotte stared. 'But why? What — what in the world brought him there?'

Peggy's colour rose. 'Well, I suppose, silly man, he came to see that it was all right, you know. And to sign the book. But he need not have troubled himself. Still,' she added, relenting, 'it was rather nice of him, wasn't it?'

'You little beast!' the other girl cried, staring at her. 'I could shake you. Oh, child, child, what a miss you have had!'

But Peggy fired up at that. For a moment she looked really angry. 'How can you!' she exclaimed. 'How can you, Charlotte! A miss indeed! When I have got a ——'

'A paragon!' Charlotte replied, her tone dry. 'But there, I was wrong, dear.' She laughed, not very merrily. 'I forgot that I was speaking to Mrs. Bligh. And, oh, Peggy, how funny you are!'

Before the offended wife could answer, the dinner came in and cut short their talk. Charles marched in first, carrying the potatoes, the plates, and the gravy. The Captain followed humbly, asking only to be ignored, and set down the mutton. There was a little confusion and crowding, until laughing, they had found their seats; then Charles began to carve. At first some restraint hung over the party, but when the novelty had worn off the meal proved to be more pleasant and easy than Charlotte had anticipated. The younger Bligh took the lead and set the talk going, hiding the awkwardness of the occasion under a gaiety that Peggy at least knew to be assumed; for whatever his merits were, he was neither gay nor talkative, and the young wife recog-

nised with gratitude that he was doing this for her. Fortunately their guest had a gift for making herself at home, and, seeing nothing else for it, she played up bravely, while Peggy's laughter broke in from time to time as joyous as a bird's trill. The shortcomings of the Cottage equipment only made food for mirth, and when this failed the privateer, its adventures, and its good fortune filled the gap.

The dinner, in a word, was a success. It went off to a marvel. But Charlotte was observant and clear-sighted, and as the meal drew to a close she did not fail to notice that the bridegroom's liveliness flagged and waned, that his attention wandered, and that the talk was left more and more to her and her friend. The effort made, he seemed to sink unconsciously into a silent mood, the mood that was natural to him. He sat toying mechanically with a spoon, his face thoughtful.

Nor, Charlotte discerned, was she the only one who noted this. Peggy betrayed her knowledge not only by glances as furtive as they were tender, but by her efforts to fill the gap, while the old man showed an equal sense of it by attempts, at once timid and pathetic, to distract the guest's attention.

Charlotte saw it all, and was moved by it. She fancied that she discerned in this humble interior, to the secrets of which she had been so abruptly admitted, not only the wisp of trouble slight as a man's whim, that threatened its happiness, but also the wings of love, ever beating, that strove to repel the invader. She saw, and her heart misgave her on her friend's account. As she climbed the winding path on her return, meeting and passing the knots of people who were streaming to and from the Cove, her thoughts turned not on her mother's displeasure, though she knew that she would be well scolded, but on the future of those from whom she had parted. Bligh loved his wife, there could be no doubt of that; every conscious action, every look and word bore witness to his solicitude, his affection, his care for her who had sacrificed so much for him. He loved.

But did he love enough? Did he love so unselfishly as to be able to conquer his humour, to overcome his moodiness, to put behind him past wrongs, to forget himself and be happy in her happiness? Or would he, as time went on, suffer the sense of unmerited misfortune and of the weakness which had cost him so much — even if he had overcome that weakness — to cloud her happiness, and to mar the humble home to which she had been content to follow him?

Charlotte had her doubts. And with the other Peggy would have been so safe — so safe, she thought.

CHAPTER XIII

THE Keppel Head formed one of the corners at the seaward end of the street, with the water-side before it and the cliff overhanging its rear. From the wall of the Rectory garden, high above, a child could toss a biscuit on the roof. Its windows looked upon the cobbled quay, made home-like to Beremouth eyes by the raffle of nets and pots that, except at spring-tides or in stormy weather, cumbered the slippery stones. Of winter nights the Keppel's red-curtained windows, wide and low, promised a warm welcome, and as far as sound ale and wholesome rum went — with a tot of smuggled brandy for skippers — they made their promise good. No doubt men went in sober and came out drunk, but the same might be said of places of higher standing; and, after all, what were men's heads made for if not to be overcome? Few in those days found fault with this law of nature, provided the liquor was sound and not hocussed: and if the talk at the bar was sometimes stormy, and not rarely brutal, so was the life it reflected. Both smacked of the sea, its savour and breeziness, its sudden shifts from calm to tempest, its callous indifference.

But this Sunday evening at the Keppel Head was an evening in a thousand. Beremouth kept high festival and the house hummed from threshold to attic. Four-fifths of the crew of the lucky brig were there, in various stages of enjoyment, and the greater part well advanced on their road. Laughter and raucous voices poured in gusts from the windows, and, for once, the door between the privileged snug and the kitchen stood open that the humblest might pay his

court to Captain Ozias, or at the worst catch a glimpse of the hero in his glory.

For, at any rate, for Copestake it was a night of nights. He loomed, red-faced and expansive, through the misty aureole of smoke and spirits that surrounded him. Yet even at the stage that he had reached — and the value of the *Belle Dame* had trebled itself since he had entered the house — he remained true to himself and enjoyed his triumph after his own fashion. Three times he had told his story, but new hearers, steaming rummers in their hands, still clamoured for the tale, and Copestake was nothing loth to repeat his *Mea Culpa*.

‘To be sure, on the weather quarter we was,’ he said for the fourth time, ‘with the helm hard-up, and kep’ her so till the after-guns come to bearing, and then no more but let her have it as we passed her stern-post. Then boxed about lads, and under her stern again, raking her fore and aft, and they not able to fire more than the long swivel ! Oh, ’twas rare ! Three times we raked her, but the last tack they sheered and come up abeam of us, and shots came aboard from such guns as they had, and terrible ’twas for Christian men ! So, “Barney Toll,” says I, pitying the poor souls as was being sent to their account unprepared, “it’s sinful work,” says I, “and the burden more than I can bear. Carry on, if so it must be, and if a mast goes, run under her quarter while they are in the raffle and give her the full of it !”’ Ozias paused, shook his head and groaned, his hearers hanging breathless on his next words, though three-fourths of them had heard the story and knew precisely what was coming. ‘The full of it !’ he repeated, sighing. He shook his head dolefully. ‘And the words no more than out o’ my sinful mouth, than a ball passed by my head — crouching at the break of the poop I was — and lodged in the main, and there was I, Cap’n Copestake, within one foot of everlasting damnation, and naught but covenanted mercy ’tween me and it. ’Twas terrible, I tell ’ee, lads. I didn’t ask no second sign, but

down I tumbled quick as you please, in a sweat to think o' what I had escaped, and hid myself 'twixt two tubs in the after-hold till the trouble be over-past. And every minute, thinks I, as I lay there all of a shake, there's poor ignorant seamen as never gives a thought to their immortal souls being swept to perdition, cursing and swearing, and all by the act of me, Cap'n Ozias Copestake, as knows better and should ha' taught them, instead o' bringing their poor bodies into danger. 'Twas a terrible thought, I tell 'ee,' he repeated solemnly, his gaze glued to the floor at his feet, while a sympathetic thrill ran through the magnetised circle. "But never again! Never again, Ozias," says I. "Your sinful body will never lead you into this trouble again!"

He was silent so long that an outsider, a stranger who had listened with feelings that may be imagined, could bear it no longer. 'But I hear you gave her a broadside at the last, Cap'n,' he said.

'Like enough, like enough they did!' the Captain answered, sunk in gloom. 'Like enough Barney Toll did, the Lord forgive him. He's a hardened sinner is Barney and knows no better. He's one as I'd ought to be afraid to go to sea with in an Indiaman, let alone that shell of a brig! And to hear the men cursing at the guns, and no more thought o' their souls than so many Bristol niggers, 'twas too much for me! Let alone that sign that come to me and said, as plain as plain, "Go below, Ozias, and get between the tubs, and leave it to them as thinks nothing o' their latter end to carry on!" It was humble and thankful I was to do it.'

'Well, I'm hanged!' the outsider muttered. He looked about him with goggling eyes. If anything could have astounded him more than the tale, it was the breathless admiration that the men about him paid to it. 'Well, I am hanged!' he repeated in a mazed voice.

But he was a landsman who had dropped in by chance, and he knew nothing of Ozias and his ways. He did not

know that if Ozias was to be believed, he had taken refuge between the tubs — if the tubs had not figured in each repetition his hearers would have been sorely disappointed — in the heat of every action in which he had taken part. He did not know that than Ozias, croak as he might ashore, there was no more desperate fighter afloat, and that three parts in four of the charm which the company found in his narration lay in a mystifying uncertainty how far it was real to Ozias himself. Hence the bated breath, the rapt attention, the awed faces that even the foreseen reappearance of the tubs failed to provoke to a smile.

Some held the story to be pure delusion. Others believed it to be an invention, framed in the first place to afford spiritual comfort to Ozias's conscience, and persisted in so long that Ozias himself now believed in it. But the majority regarded it as a mystery, a parting of body and spirit, as it were, that shed about Copestake an awful light. They discussed it in corners, in low voices, thinking slowly and speaking seldom. They remarked with admiration that even in his cups Ozias never departed from it, nor did the boldest venture to contradict it in his presence — not even Barney Toll, though Barney was the roughest of mates.

By this time both rooms were full of noise, for by some odd accident an anker of Nantz had sprung a leak and been brought ashore, and the crew were standing treat to the privileged. The noise of the revel could be heard as far as the Privateersman, where a like scene was staged, and it is possible that a similar anker had met with an accident. Between the two houses men reeled to and fro, brushing aside the half-hearted efforts of the women to lead them home.

Of those who bragged and staggered, among the tipsiest was Joe Fewster. He had had his share of the brandy — was he not Budgen's nephew? — and his head was not of the strongest. He viewed the wealth accruing to his uncle as already his own, and was loud in his denunciation of Budgen's stinginess. 'The old skinflint!' he boasted, address-

ing any who would listen to him. 'He'll ha' to do me rich now ! He'll ha' to gi' me a share, or sure as I'm alive I'll 'list ! I'll skelp him now or I'll cost him more than his whole cargo, so help me, I will !'

His hearers winked. 'And how'll 'ee do it, Joe ?' they asked slyly, though Joe's hold on Budgen was no secret.

'You'll see !' Joe replied, with drunken gravity. 'And he'll see too, th' old curmudgeon ! I ha' got him in the hollow of this hand ! There's a good time coming, and I do invite 'ee all to drink wi' me to-morrow, and day after, and day after that and ——'

A man cut him short. 'Lord,' he said, with a wink, 'wi' treating and drinking you'll drink the prize dry — if so be as you are as good as your word ! But there, lads, I'm fearing Joe, brave as he be now, when he's facing Budgen to-morrow he'll sing another tune ! You'll be hiding between the tubs, Joe, I'm fearing ?'

'Ay,' a third put in, struck by a happy thought. 'I fear that be so. But there's a way out o' that Joe, lad. Face the old chap while the drink's in 'ee, that's what I say ! No time like now — if ye bean't afeared of him ?'

'Show him me !' Joe bawled, staggering to his feet, and striking out wildly. 'Show me the old badger ! And I'll strip his skin off him ! Show him me !'

'Fine words ! Fine words, lad, for sure ! But the Cove's far and ——'

'I'll go there, right now. I'll go there !' Joe shouted. 'Sink me, but I will !' He waggled his silly head, and reeled towards the door, fell against the table, brought up short and cursed it. 'Wha' you getting in my way for ?' he maundered.

The jokers saw their chance. They egged him on, grinning at one another. One smacked him on the back, another pushed him towards the door. With shouts of laughter they handed him across the quay, calling to others and passing on the jest. The notion of rousing old Budgen from

his bed tickled them hugely, and with drunken jokes they hauled in a boat, and at no small risk of a ducking Joe, still hiccoughing threats of what he would do, was bundled into it. The cool air did anything but sober him, and he would have set off without oars. But someone fetched them and set them on the thole-pins, and amid a volley of 'Off you go, Joe! Bully for you, Joe! Bolt the badger, Joe!' they gave the boat a powerful thrust and sent it out.

One, more sober than his fellows, opined that the man might be drowned. But 'Not he!' the others scoffed. 'He's a fool, but he's a waterman! And the wind's off shore. 'Twill be quiet under the point. He'll not drown!'

Joe so far justified their opinion that, becoming aware that he was holding oars, he began to pull away more steadily than might have been expected. He rowed, indeed, after a fashion that promised to make his voyage a long one, and the oars rattled on the thole-pins in no seaman-like manner. And once or twice he fell over the thwart. But he recovered himself each time, gave way again, and the ebb that was running carried him out. The men listened awhile to the sound of the oars, then reeled back to their drink and speedily forgot him.

Fortunately for him, Joe knew every rock and streak of creaming water that fringed the beach, and drunk or sober, he had the longshoreman's instinct. But by the time he found himself abreast of the point towards which he had been headed, his notion of his destination and his errand had grown hazy. When he opened the Cove — or would have opened it had he been able to see — the off-shore wind that blew out of the Cove and put a chop on the water, helped the ebb-tide to carry him seawards. For some minutes he did not notice this, or that he was drifting at a fair rate towards the coast of France. Then his obfuscated senses grew clearer, and he became aware of what he was doing. He paused, swore tipsily, looked about him and wondered in his muddled way what had brought him there. Presently

feeling the breeze on his left hand, he pulled the bow of the boat round and set it for the land again, but his progress was now slow. Both wind and tide were against him, and he was in no condition to make a steady effort. He made little way.

The moon had not risen, and a landsman in his plight, with nothing about him but the dark sea, rippling invisibly against the bow, and breaking here and there into pale gleams, would have, likely enough, been panic-stricken. But Joe was not a landsman, and though muddled and perplexed, he persisted, and made some way. The notion of visiting Budgen had passed from his mind, and why he was afloat he could not say; but when, pausing to take breath and to look over his shoulder he saw a dark mass before him, he had the sense to know that it was the French prize, and he supposed that it was the object that he had set out to reach. He pulled on, drove his boat under the quarter, got hold of the chains, and swaying perilously on his feet, he pulled himself along until he found the ladder.

He climbed aboard without mishap, but was still so fuddled that he let his boat go adrift, and when he reached the deck he did not think it strange that a man should clutch him by the throat. Probably he took the act for a friendly move, to save him from falling, for as the man relaxed his grasp, Joe laughed foolishly. 'Stacks o' brandy!' he hic-coughed. 'Fair stacks o' brandy!' He added something about 'Ozias's navy! Much right as anyone,' and he reeled aft, a little more drunk now that his anxiety was relieved. He had been aboard in the afternoon, he knew his way, and he staggered aft and tumbled down to the skipper's cabin. No light there — nor above, for that matter! But all that he now wanted was to sleep, and he felt for the bunk. He did not find it, but that did not matter either, and he slipped to the floor, his back against a bulkhead. Almost before he had touched the wood he was asleep and snoring, nor did he know any more than the planks under him that he had been

within as little of his death as was hardly worth naming. For once the drink had saved a man's life.

Unluckily for him, he was one of those who never become seasoned vessels, but pay for every bout the penalty of an aching head and a queasy stomach. How long he slept he did not know, but he awoke to a dreadful sense of nausea and giddiness. The grey light stealing in through the round port-hole, disclosed the squalor of a cabin hastily abandoned. Overalls that had slid into corners lay mixed up with sea-boots and empty bottles, frowsy blankets hung from dingy bunks, and the smell of spirits poisoned the air. The brig floated on an even keel, but Joe's brain reeled, and the floor heaved with it. With a groan he closed his eyes and sought relief in sleep.

But something, he did not know what, kept unconsciousness at bay; something that in comparison with his splitting head and sickening qualms was a slight, yet a growing discomfort. To escape it, and to relieve his aching lips, he rose on his elbow and with an exclamation of disgust he turned over. He found no relief; on the contrary, he awoke, shivering, to the fact that he was wet and chilled to the bone. The close air, reeking with an odour noisome to him at the moment, turned his stomach, and he sat up, and leant his head on his hand. He looked dizzily about him.

A second later he staggered to his feet, staring with incredulous eyes at the floor of the cabin. Things were afloat, nay, it was all afloat; and through the shallow flood that covered the boards rose here and there a stream of bubbles.

For the space of half a minute, Joe, propping himself against a bunk, eyed the phenomenon stupidly. His first notion was that the horrors, of which he had had one experience, had taken on a new shape. But even while he glowered at the water it seemed to rise, and the truth broke on his bemused senses. With a hoarse cry he splashed to the door, dragged it open with difficulty, and in a panic he scrambled up the companion. He gained the deck, he looked

wildly round him in search of the watch. He saw no watch. There was no living creature on deck. But he saw enough and too much. He saw that, motionless as the brig lay, the sea was chopping briskly about her under a rising breeze, and he sprang to the port quarter and looked over.

One glance confirmed his fears. A second look he cast at the *Lively Peggy*, swaying gently at her moorings, the length of two cables away. Then he raised his voice and yelled, his headache and his qualms alike forgotten. He reeled, still shouting, to the starboard gunwale — no, there was no boat there either. Hurling shrill cries through the grey morning stillness, he ran to the fo’c’sle, and dropped into it. Here there was but a splash of water on the planks, but he had seen too much to be deceived. He tore the nearest sleeper from his bunk. ‘Turn out!’ he screamed. ‘Turn out, you swabs!’ He seized another by the hair, and shook him. ‘Turn out! Turn out! The brig’s sinking! The brig’s sinking, you drunken pigs!’

‘What the blazes ——’

‘I tell you the brig’s sinking!’ Joe repeated, desperately shoving the resisting seaman to the ladder. ‘There’s no boat, and I can’t swim. She’s down a’most to the chains now!’

The man swore at him, struck at him, thought him mad. But Joe persisted. He dragged out another; he pushed them, angry and furious as they were, on deck. There a single glance over the side was enough, and three panic-stricken voices bawled across the grey waters. ‘Ahoy, there! Ahoy, the *Peggy*! Help! We are sinking!’ they screamed.

Three other men staggered up, sleep in their eyes. For them, too, a glance was enough. The brig was low in the water and sinking. The sounding-rod, hastily dropped, showed so many feet of bilge that pumping, if they had had the strength, was useless. Still, ‘Haul out those Frenchies!’ one cried. ‘Set them to the pumps and ——’

‘Set them to your grandmother!’ Joe retorted bitterly. ‘They’ve gone and taken the boats — they’re half-way across

with this wind, damn them ! And scuttled her, you thundering swabs, while you snored !'

'Ay, and broached the top tier o' casks !' a seaman muttered, sniffing the brandy that scented the morning air. The main body of the French crew had been removed, but those who had been left, having escaped from the part of the hold in which they had been confined, had made a job of it.

Cursing furiously, the men raised their voices together. But to no effect. Not a head showed above the bulwarks of the *Peggy*, and it was plain that there, too, the crew left on board had made free with the liquor. No help was to be expected from them. Desperate, two of the men bunged an empty cask and reeved a line about it, while others sought for loose gratings and began hurriedly to lash them together — but without ceasing to shout. Oaths of anger at their own folly flew like hail, for all saw that, though they might save themselves, the prize was doomed and there would be a heavy reckoning to pay. But first to save themselves, for, sailor-like, not a man could swim, and the pale misty water, heaving sullenly about them, was creeping up the brig's side.

Still the sleeping *Peggy* remained blind, deaf, and mute. She gave no sign; even her boats lay to landward of her and out of sight. The men strained their eyes, searching the Cove and the slope of the bluff. But the slumbering cottages that sprinkled the Cove might have been a hundred miles away for all the hope they gave. Budgen's lay hidden from them by the hull of the *Peggy*.

Yet it was from one of the cottages that help came. The men's voices had grown hoarse with hailing, when one of them, looking shorewards, saw a man moving on the path that led to the Cove. As he descended towards the beach, his eyes alighted on the *Belle Dame*, and he seemed to be wondering if the alarm was a drunken freak. Then — and pretty quickly — the man appeared to grasp their plight, and to the watchers' joy he started into activity. He ran across the shingle and pushed down a dingy. He hurried to

the loft for sculls, and shoved off, plying one over the stern.

For a space he was lost behind the bulk of the *Peggy*, and the men trembled lest he should board the privateer. If he did he might be too late, for with every moment the French brig wallowed more deeply. But apparently the man had grasped the need for haste, for two minutes later he came into sight rounding the stern of the *Peggy* and plashing over the ripples. He wore no more than a shirt and breeches, and 'It's young Bligh,' one exclaimed.

'Ay, 'tis the Lieutenant !' a second agreed, and in haste to shift the blame they cursed the watch on the *Peggy* for drunken swine.

Bligh twisted his boat round to come under the quarter. 'Is it too late to do anything ?' he shouted.

'Ay, sir ! We are but five.'

'Scuttled ?' He held his boat a few yards from the chains.

'To be sure,' they cried, shamefaced. They tried to carry it off by cursing the Frenchies.

'Are her money and papers on board ?'

'The skipper took the money !'

He measured her depth with his eyes. 'Then get her log !' he ordered. 'He's not taken that, I'll be bound.' And as they hesitated, 'Jump, men !' he added, 'or, by the Lord, I don't take you off !'

They measured the risk, each loth to go below. But the habit of authority carried it, two of the men hurried to the cabin, the others turned and snatched up such possessions as they chose. Two minutes later Bligh took aboard, sinking his craft to the gunwale, five of the meekest sailormen that ever used the sea — and Joe. Nor was it too soon. The brig was sinking sluggishly, keeping an even keel and as little moved by the small sea that was running as if she had stood on the stocks. She was as good as lost and gone, the prize so hardly won, with her rich store of brandy and all that it meant of profit and pay and prize-money.

Bligh looked darkly at the men, but said not a word until

they had rowed him to the *Peggy*. Then 'Get aboard and rouse them out !' he said sternly. 'You'd all get six dozen if you sailed with me. If you value your skins, I'd advise you to get out of sight before this is known !'

The men, ashamed to retort, hastened to do as they were bidden. Joe alone kept his seat, and with him for a crew Bligh went on towards the beach. 'How did you come aboard ?' he asked, eyeing Joe with distaste.

Joe told him. 'They'd all ha' been drowned but for me,' he said proudly. He, at any rate, was not responsible.

'And no loss !' the Lieutenant retorted. He was thinking for how small a fault he had suffered — in comparison with these ! Yet a horror seized him, as with the pure air of the morning cooling his brow he reflected on the likeness between his case and theirs. He thought of Peggy, from whose side he had risen to look at the weather as seamen will, and looking had caught the faint sound of a distant hail. He thought of Peggy, her fair young face cradled on her white arm, and he swore once more to keep the vow that he had taken.

Should he go up and tell Budgen ? No, Budgen would hear the news soon enough. Let him sleep while he might ! Then he thought of the Rector and his concern in the prize, and it must be admitted that he laughed. Next to Budgen's the Rector's loss would be the gravest.

He kept a backward eye on the brig, and as the boat touched the beach he uttered an exclamation. Joe, whose face was set that way, joined in it. Slowly, smoothly, with just one gentle swirl, the *Belle Dame* quivered, bowed, and sank. The flags at the peak hovered a few seconds above the surface, then they too sank beneath it, and were gone. Where she had floated the sea heaved awhile, smooth and grey and misty to the offing, broken only by the *Peggy's* hull and her bare poles.

The Lieutenant groaned. He was a seaman, and no seaman could view that sight unmoved.

CHAPTER XIV

NEWS of the catastrophe, favoured by Joe, was not long, we may be sure, in reaching the town. It sped abroad, indeed, like wild-fire in stubble. Within twenty minutes the alarm was travelling down the main street of Beremouth. Early risers threw up windows, sluggards, aroused from their sweetest sleep, stared blankly at one another, hasty feet sounded on the cobbles. Within an hour the Cove and the headland were black with gazers. All Beremouth seemed to have deserted their pillows to stand and gape at the sea that heaved cold and vacant about the bereft privateer. Prize and fortune had sunk as if by magic, and with sorrow anger was largely mingled. That so much brandy should be wasted was an affliction that came home to many; they eyed the thankless waves that had swallowed it and could have wept ! But bad as this was, it was no measure of the misfortune. That which lay beneath the waves, and, alas, lay so far below them that salvage was impossible, was now gold, doubly gilt. Men reckoned up the stout ship and the prize cargo, doubled the profit and the prize-money, and multiplied four-fold the wealth it would have brought to the little port. The tradesmen saw their visions of full tills and slates cleared of debts turn to thin air, and, 'Pity ! pity !' quoth one laconically, and flattered himself that he had summed up in a phrase the lamentations of more wordy men.

But, a Welshman and a foreigner, he did but touch the surface of the wound. It was in its pride that Beremouth suffered most sorely. It saw itself held up for a laughing-

stock, and knew that never, never would the little town hear the end of that fat prize ! Saltash would chuckle in its high places, Yealmpton would laugh aloud, Fowey and Falmouth hold their sides as they told the rich story of Beremouth and its Letter of Marque. Wherever they went the tale of Gotham and the men who planted a hedge about the nightingale would be told of them ! Loud and deep were the curses spent on the French, on the drunken crew, on Ozias and Budgen. The heroes of yesterday were become the scape-goats of to-day, and no man spared them or pitied them.

Had the watch that had slept on duty shown themselves, they would have been roughly handled. But they had taken Bligh's advice, slipped ashore, and hidden themselves, in fear, it was said, not so much of Budgen as of Ozias. Of Ozias strange tales were told. It was rumoured that, roused with difficulty and confronted with the fact, he had called for a stupendous measure of brandy, swallowed it at a draught, and sunk into the happy insensibility from which he had been dragged. Of Budgen darker stories were told, and though all that was said of him did not pass for gospel, it was agreed that he had been seized with the rope round his neck, and that he now lay in a darkened room held down by four strong seamen. The more morbid gazed hungrily at the windows of his house, while others wondered with gusto what the Rector would say to it, and added that they would not for a fortune be in Budgen's shoes when they met.

Of all concerned, young Bligh alone, it was allowed, came well out of it. He had saved the watch — though that, perhaps, was a pity. And it was whispered that he had warned Budgen of the danger of leaving the Frenchmen on board. And but for the antipathy which the longshoreman of that day felt for the Service — an antipathy that the work of the press-gang continually fed — he would have been a hero. As it was, when the crowd began to leave the Cove and stream back over the headland, more than one group

raised a cheer as they passed the Blighs' cottage, and if the Lieutenant had not laughingly held Peggy back, a fair face blushing with pride would have beamed its thanks from the window. There, at any rate, was a happy heart that day.

In the upshot the part that Bligh had played did not go without its reward. Budgen took an odd and certainly an unexpected line. Of the sufferers by the disaster he was the greatest. He had seen himself for a few intoxicating hours freed from embarrassment and raised above care. He awoke to find himself the poorer by his share of the cost of the cruise, his debt increased, and his creditor justly incensed with his management. The effect on a morose man might have been foreseen, yet it took people by surprise. He turned ugly, as his neighbours said. He took refuge in a sullen determination to do nothing. He set himself to spite the Rector at all costs. He would not borrow more, he would not refit the *Peggy*, he would hear of no more cruises, he would only sit and sulk at home, his door closed to all, and the black dog on his back. He would do nothing — with one exception.

He took back Charles Bligh. Informed by this time why the Rector had been anxious to get rid of the young man, whose presence in the place was a continual reminder of his daughter's disgrace, Budgen re-engaged him in open defiance of his patron, and hugged himself on the trick. He knew himself to be in the Rector's power. Well, the Rector, d — n him, should not have it all his own way. He, too, should suffer.

When Dr. Portnal heard this and that Bligh was again at work at the Cove, his vexation and wrath were hot enough to satisfy even Budgen. He sent for the boat-builder, and scolded, threatened, argued; but to no purpose. He might as well have argued with a stone wall. Budgen, glum and soured, allowed that his affairs were desperate. He did not deny that his only hope lay in another cruise — and the Rector was willing to make, and offered to make, a last

advance for the purpose. But he was not to be moved. He would not hear reason. He would not lay his last stake on the table. He took a gloomy pleasure in repeating this and in thwarting the other. He'd run no more risk o' blame, he said. 'And Ozias won't go afloat again, that's sure,' he added.

'He is not the only seaman in the world,' the Rector answered angrily.

'Well, he be the only one for me, and the only one I trust.'

'Then,' the Rector retorted, his wrongs rising before him, 'you trust a man whose negligence has cost you dearly — and me !'

'Then I don't trust nobody, and that's about it.'

'But — but why employ the other man ? He's only an added cost to you — an expense, Budgen,' the Rector continued sternly, 'that you cannot afford.'

'Cause I can't do my books without him !' Budgen rejoined. 'Nor I won't.' And that was his last word. Though Dr. Portnal, bringing all the terror of his brow into play, said more to the same effect, Budgen was not to be moved. He only repeated sullenly what he had said a dozen times before.

So, while the excitement died away, and days stretched into weeks, the *Lively Peggy* lay stripped and idle at her moorings, and of Sunday evenings the Beremouth lads and lasses gathered along the churchyard wall, and gazing down at her, cracked nuts and ate gingerbread. To Budgen, who could not look through the diamond panes of his fuchsia-clad home without seeing her, swaying with the tide, she became almost as great an eye-sore as to the Rector had become the son-in-law, who every day was visible going to and from his humble work.

For, rage as he might, the Rector could move neither the one nor the other. And he suffered. It was not only that he felt the man's presence and that of the daughter who had so lowered herself, to be a disgrace to him, but he found

in their neighbourhood a perpetual reminder of the fall that his pride and his belief in himself had sustained. Yet he had to put up with Bligh's presence; he could not avoid him. There was no corner he turned that might not disclose him, no moment that he could hold himself free from the fear of his appearance. Take what care he might, they must meet. When this happened — and it happened about once a week — the two passed without speaking. The young man looked before him, a smile of amusement twinkling in his eyes. The elder tried to frown down his enemy, and to crush him under the weight of his displeasure, but failing to meet the other's gaze, he was forced to pass on with a sense of defeat that recalled their encounter at the cottage and stung him almost to madness. In a long career of mastery it was his first check, and it was very bitter to him.

He laid it at his daughter's door, and, sad to say, he came near to hating her. She had never been a Portnal, he told himself; her notions had never been his! She had been false to her caste as well as to her duty. Yet for very shame he could not treat her as he treated the man. He could not ignore her if chance threw her in his way, and aware of this he considered long and carefully how he would deal with her, and he prepared himself. It is doubtful if Peggy did, but it would have availed her little if she had. When the meeting, on her side equally dreaded and desired, came about — when returning one day from the town with her poor shopping she saw her father, portly and formidable, descending the road towards her, and she knew that, prepared or not, she could not escape, the girl's heart failed her. Her knees shook under her, the beating of her heart stifled her; she had to force herself to go on. But though, as they met, speech deserted her and she could only, clutching her parcel to her breast, meet his grim silence with piteous looks, she did find words at last.

'Father, forgive me!' she cried — and what more could she have said, had she prepared herself? 'Oh, sir — forgive

us, I beseech you !' And if they had not been in the public eye she would have fallen on her knees before him.

But he was not melted. He looked at her with smouldering eyes as if he would learn whether poverty and hardship had altered her. 'It is useless,' he said. 'You have disgraced yourself, and me, and your sister. Forgiveness cannot wipe out the stain. You have taken your own road. You have chosen to sink yourself, and on the level you have sought you must live. We cannot raise you.'

'Yet, say, sir,' she prayed desperately, 'say that you forgive me.'

'And by condoning your disobedience, encourage the sin in others? No! No,' he repeated, raising his voice, and in his anger he had no mercy on her. 'My duty does not lie that way. The forgiveness that you seek will not help you, for it is not with me your punishment lies. The tie that you have formed in folly will be your punishment, and I cannot remit it. He who tempted you to dishonour your father will not, be sure, girl, long honour you. He who taught you to deceive will think it no sin to deceive you. You have given way to passion, you have set desire above duty, and he for whom you have been weak enough to do this, will be the first to despise you.'

'You say dreadful things !' she gasped. She was white to the lips.

'True things,' he replied bitterly. 'And the time will come when you will know them to be true. I do not judge you. It is he who will judge you, who is judging you even now — and judging himself. Seeing day by day, girl, the burden he has laid upon his poverty, the encumbrance that, sinking under his own failings, he has taken on his shoulders.'

'It is not true !' she protested in agony — oh, he was cruel, cruel ! — 'You do not know him !'

He was not softened. 'It is you who do not know him,' he rejoined. 'But you will know him. And the fruit of disobedience that you have eaten will be as ashes in your

mouth. Let my words warn you, for they will not fall to the ground.'

He left her weeping bitterly. He stalked on down the road. The meeting had to be, and he was glad that it was over, and that it had taken place out of earshot of others. For one moment, indeed, recalling her stricken face, the father came near to repenting of the things he had said. Tenderness stirred in him, and memory. But he trod down the feeling; he recalled his wrongs, her conduct, her deceit ! And the moment passed.

Yet, had he looked back, he might even then have repented. He might have gone back to her and many things might have been changed. For he would have seen that the girl, after tottering a few yards, had broken down altogether. Blindly seeking the side of the road, and leaning against the rough stones of the wall, she had burst into passionate weeping.

For his words had wounded her in a sore spot, they had fallen on a heart tender and open to fear. Her husband was still her lover, ardent, kind, unwearied in service, quick to shield her from every hardship that he could avert. She could find no fault in him. He was all, she told herself, that her fondest fancy had promised. But she was not blind. Love sharpened her eyes, and she saw that there were hours when she did not exist for him, when he lost himself in thought, when his face was clouded and his mind travelled far. She watched him jealously — was it not natural ? — and she knew, no one so well, when care rode him, and the hasty or impatient word would escape before he was aware. Hitherto she had set down such moments to anxiety on her account, to his reluctance to expose her to inevitable things, to humiliation, to poverty, to care. And she had put the thought of them from her, confident in his love, and prepared to suffer worse, ay, far worse things, by his side.

But her conscience was not clear, and to-day, with her father's stern prophecies ringing, like a Jeremiad, in her

ears, she trembled. Was it possible that thinking only of herself she had failed to realise the care, the cost, the burden which she had cast on him? And failed to see that he now repented? The shadow on his brow, the moments of depression that she knew so well, the moody word — was it possible that there was another cause for these than that which she had imagined? And did he in his darker hours question the wisdom of the step that he had taken?

She knew that he still loved her; she was certain of that, and certain that in his happier moods she was still the sweetheart of his dreams, and the wife of his choice. But now her heart was riven by the doubt, and worse, by the fear how long this would last. How long in poverty and trial would his heart be true to her? And if he did not repent now, if he repented by and by? What then?

After a time she ceased to weep, and alarmed lest she should be observed she composed herself. She took up her parcel and went on, and youth and hope began to comfort her. She told herself that if she were loving and patient — and she believed that there could be no end to her patience — she must still hold his heart.

But her own heart was full and all her womanly emotions were in play when she reached the cottage. She blessed the threshold that was home, she embraced with joy the hardships for which it stood. She raised the latch softly, and she saw that Charles was there and alone. He was at the table, poring over a map, and the sight was too much for her.

She flung herself on her knees beside him, she cast her arms about him, and the tears rained down her face. 'Oh, Charles, be good to me!' she sobbed. 'Be good to me! Promise, promise, you will love me always! Always, always, whatever happens! For I have only you! I have only you, now!'

The cry came from her wounded heart, and in the first moments of surprise the man, amazed by her emotion, did not understand. Yet he set himself to soothe her, stirred him-

self and, deeply stirred, by her appeal. 'My girl, my girl, what is it?' he asked, holding her from him that he might see her face. 'Look up and tell me! What is it? What has upset you?'

'I have seen my father!' she sobbed.

'Ah!' he said, 'I see!' He no longer wondered at her agitation. 'And he has frightened you?'

So much known, she could not keep her fears from him, though even in this moment of emotion her woman's instinct told her that it might be wiser to be silent. 'He — he said that you would tire of me,' she sobbed. 'He said — oh, Charles, he said that I was a burden to you! That I had cost you too much, and — and you would see it by and by! That you would be sorry you had bur — burdened yourself with me!'

He laughed, taking it lightly. 'What a piteous tale!' he said. 'And a piteous girl! He said that, did he? Well, I am not surprised, dear. It is what he would say. But your father does not know me, and you do, Peggy. You do, Peggy, don't you? And trust me?'

'Yes, yes,' she assured him. 'But sometimes you are — you are grave, and I don't know what to think.' Yet already she was comforted.

'You think I may be repenting?' he said, smiling. He tightened his arm about her. 'Foolish, foolish girl! Silly child! Why, your heart is leaping out of you! And all — do you know why?' He broke off, leaving the question unanswered, and when he resumed his tone was grave, and his manner more serious. 'Do you know why, Peggy — why you are frightened? Why you let so little a thing upset you? Because, though you love me, you do not see me as I am. And you must learn to know me, and still to trust me; to bear with my sadness when I am sad and my impatience when I am peevish. To know me not perfect, to forgive me when the past lies heavy on me, dear, and failure and disappointment. But you must never, never, doubt that I love

you, Peggy. If I could wipe out the past and its consequences, if I could make myself other than I am ——’

‘I would not change you!’ she vowed, clinging to him.

‘No, I believe you. And you must believe me. You must believe that you are the one bright spot, the joy of a life that, but for you, dear, would be all shadow. Have you not redeemed me?’ His voice was deep with feeling. ‘Redeemed me at your own cost, and dearly! Ay, dearly!’

‘No! No!’ she panted, stopping his mouth. ‘You shall not say it!’

‘But it is so. And redeemed also, I hope and pray, one who after you is dearest to me. And that being so, can you doubt that I love you — were there nothing else? That in my darkest hours it is you who lighten the poverty, the failure, the disgrace that you have stooped to share?’

She covered him with kisses, and did believe, and she was comforted. And half an hour later he heard her carolling merrily, as she went about her household tasks in the rooms above, now shaking a duster, now showing her bright face at the casements that looked on the shining sea. Not that her tasks were heavy, for the men’s care left her little to do.

For the time she was reassured. She put the ominous warning from her, she vowed that she would not remember it, that she would never in his darkest moods give thought to it again.

Yet the seed had been sown, the thought had been dropped into her mind. She was not less patient with him — and there were times when patience was needed. Rather, she was more patient. But she was watchful, and she was anxious. She laboured to cheer him and to show a gay face, and love taught her the way; and presently she became aware that she had a fellow-worker whose anxiety fell little short of hers and whose forethought, daily and hourly exercised for her, won first her gratitude and then her affection. Her eyes, open to things below the surface, pierced the meek exterior of the old Captain, and discovered how

much of the peace and contentment of the home was due to one who seemed but a cipher in it. A common love taught her to know and to lean upon him. Beremouth might think him a burden and a drawback to her. Her friends might look askance upon him as a shabby, useless, cringing old man, whom necessity and his small pay and smaller pension alone rendered bearable. But Peggy knew better.

CHAPTER XV

WITH men physical daring is more common than moral courage. The shame that compels a man to face danger is akin to the diffidence that forbids him to outrage his fellows. To women this may not apply to the same extent, but it does apply, and it was pretty quickly clear in the Beremouth neighbourhood that in her loyalty to her friend Charlotte Bicester stood alone. She found none to follow her, and few to praise her. The world took its cue from the Rector, shook its head over his girl's delinquency, pronounced her outside the pale, and preached to its daughters on the sin of disobedience. A line must be drawn, they said. For the man, cashiered, disreputable, and of low habits — he was clearly impossible; and the girl, wilful and ill-guided, having chosen to cast in her lot with him, must abide by it. She could not be a nice girl, and to countenance her would be to place a premium on misconduct. One could not be too careful.

No doubt there were girls of Peggy's own age who would have visited her were it only out of a romantic desire to see with their own eyes the shifts that love in a cottage entailed. But their elders, more cautious if as curious, set their veto on the notion. The result was that the young wife who had been all her life a leader among her peers, a gay buoyant spirit, more highly valued abroad than at home, found herself as suddenly and as completely deserted as if she had been thrown on an unpeopled island. If she alighted on a dear friend in the street, the friend met her with a forced smile, uttered a few constrained and banal phrases, and, feel-

ing the eye of a disapproving county upon her, broke away as quickly as was decent. Only Charlotte came to the cottage, and only Charlotte knew the price in the shape of scoldings and black looks that each visit cost her.

'You !' her mother would say, fanning herself furiously, 'who have your own position to make ! And ought to be particular, as I have told you, miss, times and times again ! I declare I am that ashamed of you I can hardly look people in the face ! If you were Lady Chudleigh, or the Honourable Eleanor, you might take a liberty ! Being what you are, I've no patience with you, lowering yourself as never was ! And when her own sister don't visit her !'

'More shame to her !' was Charlotte's undutiful answer. 'And I mean to tell her so some day !'

'I hope you will do nothing of the kind ! It is no business of yours, and Sir Alberty, that the minx treated so shameful, our very next neighbour ! I should like to know what he says to it. Silly, foolish girl, when there's many a man been caught by a plain face that a pretty one's jilted.'

Charlotte reddened. 'He ought to go and see her himself,' she said.

'He ! Him go to see her ! Well, Charlotte, you are a simpleton !'

'Well, he will — before another month's out. You see if he doesn't, ma'am !'

'I'll believe it when I see it !' was Lady Bicester's conclusion. 'Silly romantic girl, do you think because you've no proper pride he hasn't ?' And again, with irritation: 'I should like to know what he thinks of your goings on, miss ! You ought to be well shook !'

Charlotte made a face. And a Sunday or two later — but that was well on in the autumn — she kept her word, as far as Augusta was concerned. The two girls met after service and walked towards the Rectory together. As they paused before the arch that led into the garden Charlotte delivered her mind with her usual abruptness. 'Augusta,'

she said, 'why don't you go and see Peggy? Surely it is time you did.'

Augusta smiled. 'You think so?' she said in the tone that never failed to irritate the other.

'Of course I do! Or I should not say so.'

'Well, I think otherwise, my dear. My duty to my father comes first.'

'It's your duty to make it up.'

'But not,' Augusta replied shrewdly, 'to fail to make it up and so make matters worse.'

'But the thing is done. Why don't you make the best of it?'

'Done! It is done, unfortunately. Done so ill that it may not be possible to make any best of it,' Augusta retorted. She was armed at all points. She had thought the matter out, and was not to be ruffled.

'Well, I think you are very hard,' Charlotte urged. 'Your own sister, and your only sister!'

'And a naughty sister, and a rash sister, my dear! And what is more to the point, a very ungrateful and a very undutiful daughter, Charlotte.'

'But you've heard of the prodigal son, haven't you? He was received by his father and ——'

'Ah, on that, you must speak to her father!' Augusta replied, feeling that she was having the best of it. 'I am guided by him. And he has to think of more than his daughter!'

Charlotte fired a parting shot. 'Well, I don't think you will ever follow her example, Augusta.'

Augusta's reply — she had an angelic temper — took the form of an invitation to cake and wine — extended after a sweeping glance had apprised the speaker that Wyke had gone home.

Charlotte did not accept, but, silly girl, left in a huff; with the intention, the other suspected, of overtaking Sir Albery. In this she did Charlotte an injustice, but as a

matter of fact as the girl drove homeward she did overtake him, and on the impulse of the moment she pulled up. To no one else would the idea of pressing him to call on the girl who had jilted him have seemed anything but absurd. But Charlotte was in a class by herself; she was very angry, and the deed was done before she had weighed it.

'Sir Albery,' she said abruptly, 'why don't you go and see Peggy? There's not a soul goes near her. She might be a leper by the way she is treated.'

He turned as red as a sunburnt complexion permitted him to turn. He stared at the girl, and to tell the truth he was not a little provoked. She read his feelings, and 'There,' she said before he could reply. 'Now I've done it! I suppose I ought not to have spoken. But I couldn't help it, and mother will be mad with me!'

'Wait a minute,' he answered. He hesitated. 'Perhaps you will give me a lift?'

She nodded and he climbed up. She drove on, flustered for once, and for Charlotte shy. 'I know I am dreadfully forward,' she said penitently. 'I speak before I think, you know.'

'You haven't thought — that perhaps her husband may not like it?'

'Who — oh, Peggy's husband? I think he has more sense. I like him.' Charlotte never considered whether what she said would please. 'I believe you would like him too, Sir Albery, if you knew him better.'

'Is he — is he good to her?' he asked in a low voice.

'Very good,' Charlotte said stoutly. 'And the old man is a darling. And the place is — it's not so bad as you'd think, indeed it isn't. But she is as lonely as an owl. She sees no one from week's end to week's end, and no one goes near her. I think it's a shame!'

'Why does not her sister?'

'She won't! That's Augusta all over!'

He expressed no opinion, and Charlotte felt more than be-

fore that she had blundered. That was not a thing that she could keep to herself, and 'I wish I had not spoken,' she said. 'Mother says I am a fool !'

'A very kind fool,' he replied, smiling in spite of himself. 'But I think that you have not considered what you are asking me to do, Miss Bicester. Or how distasteful it may be to — to do it. I could not go there without ripping up things that are better left alone, and seeing things that I would rather forget.'

Charlotte yielded. 'Then don't go,' she said. 'Please forget what I said. Of course, I had no right to ask you.'

'The right of a very good friend to her,' he replied. 'You have that right Miss Bicester and I admit it. I am sure you meant well. But I cannot forget the past, nor what I hoped. Nor what I have suffered,' he added in a lower tone.

'But you would not punish her — for that !' the girl pleaded.

'God forbid ! And God forbid that I should say that it was her fault. But I suffered,' he went on, driven to confide to this girl what he had never thought to confide to anyone. 'And if I do what you ask, and I go there and see her poor and — and pinched and changed, I must suffer afresh.' Then, looking steadily ahead, 'I loved her, you see,' he said.

Charlotte found a lump in her throat. 'I'm a beast !' she muttered. 'I ought to have more thought !'

'No,' he answered, smiling in spite of his pain. 'It does you honour. But tell me one thing. Is he sober now ?'

'As a judge, as far as I know !'

'But you might not know ?'

'But he drinks water. Indeed he does ! They all do !'

Wyke shook his head. 'That looks bad,' he said seriously. 'I don't like that. It's unnatural. Water ? Good heavens !'

'Well, it's all I've seen them drink,' Charlotte maintained.

'Dear ! dear ! That's bad.' Then, as the cob reached the gate of the Grange and would have turned in, 'Thank you,'

he said. She pulled up and he got out. 'I will see,' he said awkwardly. 'But I — I shall do nothing in a hurry. Good day.'

His tone was stiff, and Charlotte as she drove on to the house believed that she had offended him, and she was sorry. 'But I don't care !' she said recklessly. Yet she looked as if she did care, and for once she did not confess her indiscretion to her mother.

She was right in one thing: in thinking that Peggy felt her isolation. She was young, and life at the Rectory had been full and, within bounds, gay. She had had many friends, and among her fellows had been valued for her high spirits and admired for the very wilfulness that had landed her where she was. She had been popular, a leader; and now to be shunned and sent to Coventry by those who had courted her and followed her was not and could not be pleasant. The treatment was bracing, it bred in her a wholesome contempt for the world's fickleness; but it hurt. Spending of necessity much time alone, she had moments of depression in which she saw herself reduced for the rest of her life to a lower level; and, being a woman with a woman's social values, she suffered.

But in the main she reacted bravely, and nine days out of ten she was able to lift herself above these feelings. She loved and was loved, and in the range of her home, confined as it was, she found far less to jar on her taste or wound her refinement than might have been expected. The cottage was small, and its plenishings poor, but its windows looked on a glorious view, it stood apart without near neighbours to overlook or offend, and it was her own. Within she reigned, and care and neatness were the homage paid to her presence by those who shared its cabin-like proportions. Not an hour passed that she had not to recognise their thought for her, and their care of her; and if the woman who came for an hour or two each day to do the rougher work was heavy-

handed, she had two men-servants to make good what was lacking.

So as a rule Peggy was happy, and many an evening, as the winter approached, and she sat by the fireside, she owned the world well lost, though they were but whitewashed walls that gave back the light of the humble lamp. With Charles leaning over a chart and sailing again some ancient voyage, with the old man busy at his bench, carving a hull, with her own hands full of some domestic task, or her eyes on one of their few books, she told herself that she envied no one — that she could say with truth 'A fig for their greatness !'

Yet she had her anxieties. With the insight of love she knew that Charles was not satisfied, and would never be satisfied while the burden of disgrace and failure weighed upon him. And of lifting that burden from his shoulders she saw no chance and no hope. It would always be a drawback to their happiness, and a cloud on their home. But it must be borne with and lightened.

Then in Beremouth that winter was a depressing one. The Peggy was out of commission, and some were the poorer for that, and Budgen was short of work and had reduced his small staff. The cheerful noise of the hammers rose less often from the Cove, there were many days when it was wholly silent, and Peggy looking down on the idle sheds feared that Charles might be the next to lose his employment, and the modest sum that it brought in. If that happened, and they were cast on the old Captain's tiny pension and slender pay, Charles would be driven to seek work elsewhere — and would it be possible for him to take her with him ? Not at first, she feared; and on winter nights when the wind flung itself against the face of the cliffs and howled in the chimney of the cottage, and she could not sleep, it was a fear that wrung her heart. She would be separated from him ! Poverty, hardship, the narrowest straits, she could bear all as long as he was with her. But she knew that he was too

proud to live on his father, even if her own pride had not scorned the thought.

That fear, however, she was sedulous to hide. Charles might sit, as he sat too often, absent and moody, betraying to watchful eyes the anxiety that he felt. But she must smile. Stooping to tasks below his station, humouring Budgen's ill-temper, plodding at the rickety desk when all his tastes were for the open sea — if he could bear this, if he could lower himself to this, surely she could wear a cheerful face, since it was all that she could do to help him.

She told herself, indeed, and many times, that her burden was a light one. But it was not so light in the face of growing perplexity, and of the reports that were afloat in the town. Budgen, it began to be hinted, was in low water. He was in a bad way. It was even whispered on the quay that he was like to be sold up. He could not find the money for another cruise — so, for the most part, they explained his inaction. He owed here and he owed there; and if peace came — and there was talk of peace, the Plymouth paper was full of it — the *Lively Peggy*, built for speed and with little cargo-room, would not be worth the copper sheathing that covered her bottom! She lay idle and useless at her moorings, and all kinds of stories were abroad. And as the winter wore on, all the stories were disquieting.

CHAPTER XVI

OVER a district stretching from Saltash to Yealmpton Augusta Portnal's handsome features, the charm of her smile, and the dignity with which she carried herself were household words. Allowed by mothers to be all that she should be, she was quoted as a pattern for daughters, and it was everywhere admitted that happy would be the man who was privileged to set her at the head of his dinner-table. Even in her home she was not ill-liked or ill-spoken of; the servants had nothing to say against her temper or her management. But with all this the girl lacked the vital spark. She awoke no flame, or the happy man had surely come forward before this; she kindled no enthusiasm, no kitchen-wench would have followed her into exile or served her without wages. She gave dignity to the Rectory, she presided over it with a cold brilliance, but warmth was not in her.

While Peggy had been there, to flit up and down the stairs, to fill the passages with laughter, and to whistle as tunefully as any blackbird in the walled garden, no one had perceived the lack. But with Peggy gone and the place fallen silent, the household felt the void and in the household no one presently felt it more sensibly than the Rector. His dignity had no longer a foil, his gravity a set-off; and worse, his hours of ease had no longer a plaything to pet or chide. Justly offended as he was, and though he had no fault to find with his remaining daughter, he owned the blank. The stillness of the house weighed on him; it remained all that was decorous, all that was becoming, and yet he was not

happy. He assured himself several times a day that it was his duty to ignore the daughter who had abandoned him, but he could not forget the daughter who had lived with him and who had been, though he had not known it, the sunshine of his home.

He was not so false to himself as to let this be seen. On the contrary he won fresh tributes by his behaviour under a painful trial. No one could have acted more becomingly, neither ignoring nor advertising his trouble, but doing his duty to society without stooping to apologies. From the railing in which smaller men might have indulged he refrained. To an intimate here and there he voiced his sorrow in a few well-chosen words; to the world he turned a face graver than usual. And that was all. He uttered no defence, sought no man's support, but went his way cloaked in a self-respecting reticence.

His temper, however, was not as equable as it had been, and he took umbrage more readily. Against Budgen in particular he harboured the bitterest feelings. It was not only that the man continued, out of sheer perversity, to employ young Bligh and so to keep the Blighs in Beremouth; but—minor grievance as this was—he was keeping the Rector out of money, and Dr. Portnal, bereft in his home, thought more of money than before. He saw his capital in the privateer lying idle, he doubted if there would remain enough to make good his advances, and he began to hate the man whose brutish obstinacy stood in the way of increasing the one and realising the other.

Pride for a time withheld him from making a final attack on Budgen. He feared that it would be futile. But when about mid-winter rumours of peace began to take definite shape and the Funds to rise—an ominous sign from his point of view—he could no longer contain himself. He hoped that an argument that had failed before might be effectual now, and it was big with purpose, and with a stern face

under his wide-brimmed hat, that he started one evening for the Cove. He would have it out with Budgen.

It was significant of his mood that he took the path that passed the Cottage. Since his daughter's return he had not gone to the Cove that way; he had used, though it was half a mile longer, the road that wound about the rear of the headland. But to-day he rose above this weakness, and that he did so, ignoring the humiliating sight that he must encounter, was a proof of the strength of his purpose. Yet when a turn in the path disclosed the thatched roof, it hurt him so sorely to think that his daughter lived in conditions so low that he turned away his eyes as he went by, in fear lest he should see her face at the window or meet her at the gate; and though neither of these things happened, his pride suffered. He felt himself degraded and he added another stroke to the score that Budgen owed him.

He would have added a second had he found Bligh in the boat-builder's company. But he was spared this. Budgen was alone, pottering about the shed, his hands idle and his face morose, an unhappy man as anyone with vision could see. But the Rector, if he had insight, had no pity; he hated idleness in the lower classes, and waste no less, and the sight of the man dawdling there while precious hours passed, put a sharper edge on his grievance.

He lost no time in broaching it. Acknowledging Budgen's surly greeting by a curt nod, 'Have you seen the Exeter paper?' he demanded.

To Budgen his visitor was a blot darkening all the landscape and he made no pretence that he was welcome. 'Not I!' he said, as contemptuously as he dared, and he wrung out a wet cloth as if the other had not been there. 'I don't trouble my head wi' such things.'

'Well, if you had you would have seen something that touches you, Budgen. I advise you to get the paper and look at it. It is reported that an early peace is certain, and I

have myself letters that promise it for the summer. It is only a question of months. Now, you have told me, man, more than once how little the brig will be worth when that happens, yet you have let the summer and the autumn pass, and you've made no use and no profit of her. But it is not too late. There is still time to fit her out and to make a cruise that may bring me some return and save you — from a debtor's prison.'

Budgen started. 'Prison?' he ejaculated savagely, as he glared at his tormentor. Yet the other saw that he was shaken. He saw that cold as the day was, beads of sweat had sprung out on his brow and that his eyes were the eyes of a frightened man.

The Rector pushed his advantage. 'Yes, a debtor's prison!' he said firmly. 'For I give you warning that I do not intend to wait long for my money, Budgen. If you do not avail yourself of this last chance to save yourself, I shall seize the brig. I doubt if she will cover your debt to me, and if she does not I shall fall back on your interest in the Cove.'

'You cannot!' Budgen cried.

'You will find that I can,' the Rector said. 'My lawyers will see to that.'

Budgen strove to maintain his truculent air and to brazen it out, but panic peeped through the pretence. 'That's just talk! Threats!' he said. But his mouth twitched.

'They are threats that I shall make good,' the Rector replied. And then in a milder tone, 'Man,' he continued, 'I am speaking in your own interest. I am giving you a last chance. You have been sleeping on the edge! Awake before you fall over. Fit out the brig, make use — make good use of the few weeks or the few months that you have. I will advance in reason, and one good prize, such as your folly and your men's drunkenness wasted, may still save you.'

'And fill your pocket,' the boat-builder muttered, with a poor attempt at a sneer. But though he acted indifference,

he was a shaken man. As the Rector had said, he saw where he stood. He wiped his brow with a trembling hand, and his next words, though he tried to infuse contempt into them, marked his surrender. 'And who's to take her out?' he muttered.

'Why not Copestake? He was in fault last time, grievously, grievously in fault. Still ——'

Budgen spat on the ground. 'He'll sail no more!' he said. 'He've done with the sea. He've said it often but he means it this time.'

'He may be persuaded.'

Budgen laughed sourly. 'Not he! Nor it don't lie with him, neither. He've wedded a wife, a body Portsmouth way, and she'd scratch your eyes out if you so much as said the word to him.'

'Well, he's not the only seaman, man.'

'Maybe. But it ain't every skipper the men will ship with! That's certain.'

'Well, you know my mind now,' the Rector rejoined. 'You have had your warning.' He pointed his gold-headed cane at the *Peggy* floating high at her moorings. 'It is a sin to let the brig rot idle there, a sin and a shame, man. And as my money is in her and I've no mind to be a loser by her, if she does not sail within a reasonable time, you may be sure that I shall take steps to secure myself. Even now I doubt if your share of her will cover my advances. But later she will not meet them by a large sum, and I'll not wait to see her value reduced to nothing!'

'And yet you've the will to advance more,' Budgen said with a sneer.

'I have—on the chance of the venture. And to save you, man, if it be possible.'

Budgen gave way though with an ill grace. 'Well, I'll think of it,' he said sullenly.

'Then lose no time. And cut down your expenses here. Waste no more money on that worthless rascal Fewster,

whom I am told you are still supporting in his idleness.' It was on the tip of the Rector's tongue to bring up the matter of Bligh's employment also, but pride stood in the way; he saw that to do so, now that his motive was known, would be to lower himself intolerably, and he left the words unsaid.

'Well, I'll consider it,' Budgen repeated, sulkily.

This was as much as the Rector looked for, and he said a parting word and closed the interview, returning to the town by the road.

He left behind him a frightened man. The boat-builder, hardly knowing what he did, wandered down to the water's edge and, with his gaze bent seawards, lost himself in gloomy meditation. The Rector's order, for an order it was, had angered him almost to madness, but it had opened his eyes. It had disclosed to him his true plight, the plight that hitherto in sheer churlishness he had refused to face. Now, roughly awakened, he saw ruin yawning at his feet, and he saw too and plainly that he had wasted the months and neglected the means that might have saved him. To stand with folded arms until the *Peggy* lost her value and his pitiless creditor came upon his other property — no policy could have been more insane or more hopeless. In that the Rector had been right and had advised him well — and yet how he hated the man! How he longed to thwart him! But to thwart him, he saw now, was to cut his own throat.

For many minutes he continued to stand where he was, gazing dully at the heaving waste that about the Point broke in cascades of snowy foam: and it may be doubted whether his rage or his fear had the upper hand. He heard the *Lively Peggy* knocked down for an old song, and he saw his creditor insisting on his pound of flesh. The Cove and all that went with it, his snug house and its harbour looking on the sea, his men's white-washed cottages sprinkled up and down the bluff like snow-berries on a bush, his slips and shed and all that made him what he was — that was his and had been his

father's and his grandfather's before him — he saw all pass from him at the fall of a remorseless hammer.

Ay, it was too true. His possession of the things, that stood to him for wife and child, was in desperate jeopardy. He was losing hold of them, with every day, with every hour that passed. That devil, who had just left him, was not going to wait for Joe's death. No, lending a little for this and a little for that, he had got him, Budgen, in his grip, he had gained ever a larger and a larger interest in the brig, willing in his subtlety and his cunning to go beyond her value. He had seen, he had planned to that end. He had perceived, beyond the *Peggy*, a richer prize and a sounder security, and presently, soon, he would press for the balance, and the Cove, so quiet, so remote, so precious and so long Budgen's own would be drawn into the maw, the greedy maw — of that devil! Ay, and he would lease it to a new man and take for himself a monstrous fine!

Budgen saw it all, doing the Rector less than justice. He saw himself denuded, beggared, driven from the house that his grandfather had built, from the cottages his father had added, from the lofts and slips that he had repaired and loved: driven from the land that his forefathers had found naked and barren, a worthless fore-shore, and that by their labour and thrift had become wealth-producing — had become the home that was his very life!

It was a bitter thought and a bleak prospect. It matched — and fitly matched the sullen waste of waters on which he gazed. But only Budgen, to whom the things about him were his all, could say how bitter or how bleak was that prospect, or how far the fear of losing his all might drive a desperate man.

CHAPTER XVII

IT has been said that to his neighbours the Rector seemed to be little changed. He carried his head as high or higher than before. But this was the outward show, for within the man was harassed to an extent that he alone could measure. He might avoid but he could not ignore the Cottage; it stretched its tentacles far, it lay in wait for him at every step. He could not leave his house, he could not walk a hundred yards with the certainty that he would not meet his daughter. At any turn, at every corner he might come upon her, dressed with a plainness that hurt his pride, yet for very shame he must stand and say a formal word to her, conscious that a score of curious eyes were on him and as many tongues itching to describe the meeting.

Nor was this all. If he entered a shop he might find his son-in-law at the counter — once he had done so and had turned and gone out in dudgeon with a mortifying sense of defeat. It had come indeed to this, that in the parish where he had once moved care-free as Jove, where his passage had bared all heads, he now shrank from showing himself, or walked ill at ease, baulking at every corner.

He hid his humiliation, he had still the strength to do that. But he felt it acutely. He was proud and, in his arrogance, sensitive; he imagined what his neighbours were saying of him, and the nuisance began to obsess him, as a beggar ever seated at his doorstep, ever on the watch for him, might have done. He foresaw the day when the trouble would overcome and unnerve him, and he would fear to go abroad at all. By the time that Christmas came, to free himself from

the odious presence, to expel the Blighs from Beremouth had become with him an engrossing purpose, the haunting subject of his daily and hourly thoughts.

He might bribe them to go — that of course. He might settle an income on Peggy on condition that the family remove to a distance — out of Devonshire, out of the West Country. That was a possible course, and he could afford to take it. It was the plan that nine out of ten men would have adopted. By it he might at once protect himself, ease his conscience — for there were hours when his conscience plagued him — and secure his child's comfort.

But he was a stubborn as well as a proud man, and he could not bring himself to do this. Though his daughter had deceived him and humiliated him, more love for her than he avowed survived in him, and in time might have pleaded for her and won the pardon that his common sense approved. But her husband? Was he to be rewarded for his presumption? Was he to see his cunning bear fruit and to enjoy in ease and comfort the prize at which he, smiling, insolent reprobate that he was, had aimed? Never, the Rector vowed in his passion, never! Whatever fell out, whatever of mockery he might have to bear he would not stoop to that point, he would not fall so far below his duty, or give that man's impudence the victory.

It remained to drive him out. And failing Budgen, and his pride did not now permit him to use Budgen to that end, there was only Sir Albery who could help him, and Sir Albery was an uncertain quantity. The Rector had given him one hint already, but Wyke had refused to move, and though that had since happened which, were he a man of flesh and blood, should have determined him, he seemed to be insensible to his wrongs.

This puzzled the Rector. He felt that, if he had been injured as Wyke had been injured, he would have sent the Captain packing within twenty-four hours; and he could only attribute the man's inaction to a foolish delicacy or to

sheer lack of feeling. The latter he thought; and he was inclined to fancy that if the matter were put clearly before him, Wyke must see his duty. Yet he hesitated; he owned that his neighbour was something of a mystery to him, and he was not quite sure how to deal with him.

Meanwhile there was another at the Rectory who also found in Wyke a teasing problem. Augusta's views of life were distorted by no excess of feeling; she approved and thoroughly approved of the line that her father had taken. That she would have clung to her sister, had she thought him wrong, is doubtful, but as it was the path of right showed clear before her, and she was not to be diverted from it by the fact that inclination also trod it. Nor did duty lose its virtue for her because it saved her from the discomfort of stooping to an intimacy that might lower her in the eyes of her world.

She had no doubt, therefore, that she was choosing the better part, and she believed that others must commend her for it. Nor was she disappointed. 'Poor dear Augusta!' one matron said with unction. 'So trying for her!' And 'What a comfort her father has in her!' agreed another. 'I do not know what he would do without her!' 'I admire that girl immensely,' chimed in a third — a mother. 'So much propriety! It is not everyone who would know how to act in such a case. No fuss, no nonsense, but you can see how she feels it!' One or two spoke openly to her, and were confirmed in their views by the pensive dignity with which she accepted their pity. With the most intimate she permitted a single unobtrusive tear, quickly wiped away. In a word, Augusta earned golden opinions. Her value, it was agreed, was not lessened and her share of the Rectory property would doubtless be increased.

But the person whom she was most anxious to please and whom her conduct, as she saw it, seemed calculated to please, remained a mystery. She had no doubt that there had been a time when Wyke had preferred her to her sister, and she

had allowed herself to imagine with reason that baulked in his choice he would return to his first love. She still thought this probable, but Wyke did not evince the taste for consolation that she expected. He continued to drop in at the Rectory, though with less frequency, but he did not pour out his sorrows in her ear, nor seek the sympathy that she was ready to give. He must approve of her conduct — for must he not resent her sister's treatment of him? But he did not say so.

In a word things were not moving quite as Augusta wished, nor as quickly; and she was at a loss to guess what was in the man's mind. She was confident, gazing into her mirror, that in all the country round she had no counterpart, and could have no rival. The swan-like turn of her neck and the swell of her figure were as perfect, and her smile as sweet as ever; and bearing in mind the vulgar saying that hearts are never so easily caught as on the rebound, she wondered what was wrong. Yet something, it was clear, was wrong.

She was turning this over in her mind when one January morning Wyke dropped in. He had walked into town, he was aglow with exercise, and in his rough shooting-coat he made a fine figure of a man. Augusta's temperament was not warm, but she was a woman, and the grace with which she received his apologies — his boots were muddy — was not lessened by his good looks.

'The truth is, I came in to see your father,' he said when the first greetings were over. 'I am told that he will be free in a few minutes. However, I am not sorry to find you alone, for I want your good word.'

This was better, and Augusta smiled, well pleased. 'With him?' she asked.

'That's it.' He settled himself in his chair. 'One of my tenants is in trouble. You know him, no doubt. John Oliver of Lower Dene?'

'Little John?'

Wyke nodded. 'That's the man. He holds some land of your father, and some of me, Miss Portnal. He's a thriftless fellow and always behind-hand. Well — mind, I'm finding no fault with your father — but he is distraining.'

Augusta's eyes met his. 'Oh, dear, dear !' she said. 'Poor Little John ! But a word from you, and I am sure my father will do as you wish.'

'I could pay the money, of course,' Wyke explained. 'But if I do there will be no end to it. The man's an idle improvident fellow and the Rector will say it is his fault, and he'll be right. But he's an old tenant, and I'm concerned for him. The land he holds of me won't keep him, and if he loses your father's bit, he's done.'

'I am sorry !' Augusta said. 'And how good of you, Sir Albery !'

'Well,' Wyke answered ruefully, 'he's one of my people, and I must keep a roof over his head. But I know what the Rector will say, and in another case I should say the same !'

Augusta smiled. 'He shall not say it !' she assured him, her face lighting up. 'We will attack him together, and I'm confident that it will be a poor case that we cannot make good between us.'

Wyke thought that he had not for a long time liked her so well. 'You're a trump !' he said. 'I am sure that if you say he shall not go —'

'He shall not !' she affirmed, nodding confidently. 'He has three or four flaxen-haired children ? Yes, dear little things, I know them ! Well, you may depend upon it, Sir Albery, they shall not be homeless if I can help it !' The sympathy in her fine eyes was the one touch needed by features a trifle statuesque.

Wyke was thinking that he had done her injustice when the Rector came in, and the visitor's errand was detailed. But the Rector shook his head, a Jupiter benevolent, but wise. 'No,' he said. 'Do you be guided by me. You are too easy, Wyke. The man is good for nothing, has been good for

nothing for years. You may prop him but you can't save him. Take my advice and get rid of him, or, believe me, it is not one rent you will have to forgive, man, but one after another until you are tired. Get rid of him before it is too late.'

'Well, you see, his father was my father's butler,' Wyke explained. 'That's where it is. And if he loses your twenty acres, what he holds of mine isn't enough to keep him, and, he'll be on the parish in two twos.'

But the Rector, strong in experience, was firm. 'As well first as last,' he said. 'It's no good propping a falling tree. He'll cost you more than he's worth, he'll ruin your land, and the end the same. Let him go, Wyke! Let him go. That's my advice.'

'Father!' Augusta spoke, without raising her eyes from her work.

'Well, my dear?' he answered good-humouredly. 'What do you want to say?'

'I want you to do this — to please me,' she said. 'There are three or four little children.' She looked up and met Sir Albery's eyes. 'And his wife is not strong.'

'No, she is a delicate woman,' Wyke agreed.

'Just to please me, sir,' Augusta pleaded. She let her work fall into her lap and looked at her father.

He grasped the situation, but for appearances' sake he would not at once give way. 'You are no judge of such matters, my dear,' he said. 'And Wyke is wrong. That the father was a good butler does not make the son a good farmer. It is only adding loss to loss.'

'For the sake of his wife and children?' Augusta urged.

The Rector shook his head, but genially. 'Well, I think you are wrong,' he said, 'but it is no great matter. Have it your own way, my dear, if you must. But don't blame me, Wyke. I'll withdraw the distress and give him another chance — though I know it will be no good.'

'Thank you, Rector,' Wyke replied. 'I could pay you

out, of course. But I don't want to do that. Oliver will be the better with this hanging over him, and I shall speak to his wife. Of course I will see that you are no loser in the end.'

The Rector waved that aside. 'Not my judgment but my child consents,' he said indulgently. He gave a moment to consideration, and during that moment he succumbed to a temptation — the opportunity seemed to be heaven-sent. In the tone of one to whom something had just occurred, 'That is soon settled,' he continued. 'But I'll tell you what you can do for me. It's not much — but it is much to me, for it touches my comfort.'

Wyke met him readily. 'If there is anything I can do, Rector, you may be quite sure —'

'It's about Captain Bligh. Wyke, get rid of that man — to oblige me. I'll be quite open with you,' the Rector continued, so set upon his purpose that he was blind to Augusta's warning glance. 'My younger daughter's stay in this place is a running sore to me — I make no secret of that with such a friend as you. It is a great and a growing annoyance. I am fearful with every hour that some exhibition of that old man's dreadful propensity may — may involve us still further in their disgrace.'

Wyke had seldom looked more uncomfortable. 'Yes,' he said slowly, 'I see that, to be sure, Rector. To be sure. And it is awkward for you. But I hear and I hope it is true that they have turned over a new leaf. Both, I am told.'

'Who told you?' The Rector had opened the matter with the fullest intention of being conciliatory, but his feelings would out. 'Who told you that?' he repeated, his tone sharp.

'Well, to be frank, Miss Bicester.'

'And you believe it?'

'I am assured that the old man has not broken out for — well, for a good many months.'

'And you think that the dog will not return to its villainess !' The Rector spoke with imprudent warmth. 'You, a man of the world, Wyke ? I wish I could think so ! I wish I could think so. But I cannot. The chains of a lifetime are not so easily broken, and the debauch will be only the more disgraceful when it comes ! The leopard does not change its spots.'

'Still, for the present, don't you think we may wait ——'

'Wait ! You would have me wait ?' The Rector in spite of himself was waxing hot. 'Please to consider, my friend, what that means — to me. Am I to wait until that crapulous old man is picked up in the gutter ! Am I to wait until Beremouth rings once more with his shame — the shame of those with whom my girl's folly has connected us ? No, I cannot wait ! She has touched pitch and I cannot save her from defilement. I cannot save her,' the Rector repeated, his feelings blinding him to the change from doubt to impatience that his words wrought in his hearer's looks. 'But I have still a daughter, and I must think of her, and of myself and of my position. For the sake of all of us and the sake of my people, these men ought to go.'

'Still' — Wyke was feeling very uncomfortable indeed now — 'he is a good officer, Rector, and you — you see I have to think of the Service.'

Augusta forestalled her father's reply; she knew that he had no very high opinion of the Fencibles and she dreaded what he might say. 'It is so sad,' she murmured softly. 'So very sad for us all, Sir Albery !'

But the Rector would not take the hint. 'Sad !' he repeated warmly. 'It is more than sad ! It is a scandal ! Think, man, of my position and my duty. How can I maintain the one or perform the other with ease of mind ? While this incubus, this horror — for it is no less — weighs upon me every hour ?'

Augusta sighed. 'I am sure that Sir Albery sees that,

father,' she said. 'And he will help us if he can.' She looked at Wyke with eyes that would have melted most men.

If the Rector had only left it there! But he could not. The patience and conduct that had once been characteristic of him were no longer his.

'Then if he sees that,' he said curtly, 'let him get rid of Bligh! He can do it with a word. And that is the way and the only way to help us.'

Unfortunately it was not the way to deal with the man before him. 'Yes, I see that,' Wyke admitted reluctantly. 'But if the old chap is really trying to turn over a new leaf, isn't it — isn't it a little hard on him? And if they go, what are they to do?'

Augusta longed to catch her father's eye, but he rushed on his fate. 'That is their business!' he said.

Wyke raised his eyebrows. 'But your daughter?' he asked.

The Rector felt the cold douche. It was on the tip of his tongue to reply 'That is her business!' But for very shame he could not. And in a lower tone, 'That is my business, Wyke,' he said.

'I'm afraid it is,' Wyke answered drily. 'Still, I will think it over, Rector. Only you see ——'

'You see how we are placed, I am sure,' Augusta murmured aware that in another moment it would be too late to say anything. 'How sad and how distressing it is for all of us, Sir Albergy. For my sister must suffer more than we do. A hundred things must every day while she is here, bring the change home to her. She must see that in Beremouth she is in an impossible position; and it is for her sake as much as for ours that my father is anxious to do this. Perhaps — over-anxious,' she added softly.

This was another view of the matter, and once more Wyke hesitated. He looked as if he might still yield. 'There is that,' he said. 'To be sure.'

'There is indeed. And I am sure you will do what you can to help us.'

If the Rector had held his tongue, he might have had his way. For Augusta saw that Sir Alberly wavered. But the Rector's temper, morose of late, would not let him be silent. 'He can do the thing in a moment if he will,' he said testily. 'There is no difficulty. No difficulty at all if he wishes to oblige us.'

On which, human nature being what it is, Wyke went about. 'You see, I have to think of the Corps,' he repeated.

'The Corps be ——' so much the Rector said, and then he remembered his cloth and bit off the fatal word. But the evil was done; and though he lowered his tone and said pettishly, 'Well, well, you must judge; if you think the Corps so important, there is no more to be said,' the moment had passed.

For Wyke said no more. The Rector looked at his watch, saw that he had an appointment, and said so.

Wyke remarked that he must go too, and he rose and making his adieux with as good a grace as he could, he went out, with his host. But no more passed between them. They parted coldly at the door. 'Ungrateful puppy!' the Rector thought, and he wished with all his heart that he had not given way about the distress.

What Augusta thought when they had left her may be guessed. She was too dutiful a daughter to scold her father, even had she dared to do so. And she said nothing to him. But it must be owned that when she met him at dinner that afternoon her smile was more cold than it usually was, and that for some days there was a marked absence of his favourite dishes at table.

CHAPTER XVIII

WYKE acted for the best, but the result was unfortunate. His attitude put the last touch of asperity on feelings bitter enough before, nor did the Rector take his defeat the less sorely because he saw in a saner hour, that he had failed through lack of temper. Having so failed a weaker man might have relinquished his purpose, a stronger might have risen above the pettiness that inspired it. But, for good or ill, Dr. Portnal was as much above the one standard as he fell below the other. He could neither resign himself with equanimity to the position forced on him nor had he the strength to despise the mocking eyes, the sneers and gibes, that, exaggerated by his fancy, continually stung his pride and mortified his self-esteem.

Instead he became only more sternly set on his purpose. The presence of the offending household at the Cottage had been at first but a trouble, vexatious and teasing. But in these days it came to be more; an ulcer, robbing life of ease, spoiling his peace, marring the enjoyment of his existence. It had become a part of him; he could not escape from it. With every hour its presence was forced on his attention. On the market-day that followed his overture to Wyke he met Peggy in the crowded street and, forced to stand and speak with her, forced to mark the distress that her manner betrayed, and her scared face — for she read his thoughts like a book — he fancied himself the target for every eye. Thrice, too, in that week he came face to face with her husband, and passed on his way pricked to fury by the bantering smile that he read in the young man's eyes. The feeling

that he could not move with comfort in his parish, that he walked ill at ease where he had so long reigned, that even to his curate he could not speak with the old assurance — these things embittered him strangely, raised contempt to hatred, inspired his darker moods with rancour.

For he was safe nowhere. On the Bench where he had browbeaten so many, did one colleague whisper to another, he lost countenance, suspecting that they jested at his expense. In church his stately port lacked something of its dignity, his flowing robes, as he passed from reading-desk to chancel, a part of their grace. He felt the joint in his armour, and was ever conscious, Achilles-like, of his heel. Not for a moment could he forget the enemy that lurked amid his congregation, the enemy smiling, disdainful, triumphant in his villainy, who listened and criticised.

Even in the quiet walled garden where he might have counted on a respite, he had no enjoyment, though his trouble wore a different guise. For there a shadow walked with him and darkened his path. The whisper of malicious tongues was silent but the spectre of his child was present — the child who had been so gay, so merry, so vital a thing, whose laughter had brightened his house and lightened his hours. He saw her shabby and careworn, flitting through mean places, ashamed and degraded. And his steps flagged, and his heart was sad. Against her, as he began to see, he could not always keep his anger hot.

At such times he told himself that he had forgiven her, and that his only feeling for her was pity. He did not doubt that she had long ago discovered her mistake, and had repented, bitterly repented of it. He did not doubt that her low-lived husband had lost no time in dispelling the glamour of the lover, and that poverty and commonness had opened the eyes that passion had blinded. But she had made her bed, and here or elsewhere her fate must be ever to sink lower, fretted by squalid surroundings, shocked by vulgar habits, her refinement daily and hourly chafed by coarse

speech. She might be pitied, she was to be pitied, but she could not be saved. Yet in the peace of his walled garden the father sighed as the man pronounced judgment.

She could not be saved; unless — unless, indeed, by some means that did not benefit the man she could be parted from him? That was a thought that came late into the Rector's mind; that came in truth only when the heat of his wrath had sunk to a cold fury. But once admitted it grew, and loomed larger and larger. To be rid of both would be an unspeakable relief, though that relief, he began to see, might be attended by after-pains, by prickings of conscience, and the stirrings of a love far from dead. But to be rid of the man! To be rid of the man! That were unmixed good. It meant not only a prodigal taken back, chastened and forgiven, into the fold, but a victory over the powers of darkness that had seduced her. The Rector grasped the thought and turned it and turned it in his mind. The old and obvious plan of a bribe recurred more than once, but he discarded it. A bribe would not serve, for that way lay no victory. He could not lower himself to buy his daughter back; and so to enrich that man.

And then as he sat one evening, brooding sadly over his wine, he was told that Budgen wished to see him. His first impulse was to bid the man call at a more fitting hour; his second to order lights to be put in the room that he used for parish purposes. But before Wignall had closed the door, 'Stay,' the Rector said, reviewing the position — even on such a bear as Budgen the dining-room with its dark, shining table and sparkling glass might have an influence. 'Stay! It's a cold night. You may show him in here, Wignall. And bring another glass.' It was a rare condescension on the Rector's part.

But eyeing his visitor closely as he entered he was persuaded that his thought was a good one. Whatever might be the cause of the change, Budgen was in a subdued mood, and seeing this his host bent himself to be genial. He waved

the boat-builder to a chair. 'Sit down, man,' he said. 'It's a cold evening, and a glass of wine will not hurt you. Another glass, Wignall? Good.' Then, when the butler, after filling Budgen's glass, had withdrawn, 'What is it, Budgen?' the Rector asked.

'It is about the brig, your reverence.'

'Good. You have made up your mind at last, I hope?'

Budgen fingered his glass, his eyes wavering from object to object, and his manner uneasy. 'Pretty much I have,' he said. He spoke civilly for him. 'I'll fit her out — as soon as may be.'

'The sooner the better. There's not a day to be lost, if you are to make the most of her. I've no doubt that we are in sight of peace, and the late spring may see it. And peace once made ——' the Rector shook his head pregnantly.

'I've given the orders,' Budgen muttered, his eyes glued to the glass that he turned between his fingers. 'And I've seen some of the men. But you'll have to find the ready, sir.'

'I said I would, and I will,' the Rector rejoined. 'I'll be as good as my word, though I fear that the margin is small. Very small,' he repeated, shaking his head. 'You've persuaded Copestake to take her out, then?'

Budgen shook his head. 'He'll have none of it!'

'Then you must talk to him, man!'

'No good,' Budgen spoke with a touch of his old obstinacy. 'He won't go, Ozias won't. He won't go, whether or no. I've tried and no use at all. He've married a lass, and he be set on her, and she'll not hear of it. We've got to find another, and it's not many the Jacks will ship with, nor their women let them.'

'What do you propose, then?' The Rector looked grave. He was ready to risk money, and of Copestake he knew the best and worst. But to put his stake in the hands of one whom he did not know was another matter.

'To be sure.' Budgen's gaze moved shiftily from his glass

to the Rector, and back again. 'To be sure, that be the question. 'Tis the skipper it turns on more'n the craft or the fo'c'sle. There's many as can navigate surprising in the snug o' the Keppel as couldn't make a landfall with Ameriky under their forefoot ! And some as could hit the mark, but fire a gun a mile to wind'ard, and they'd be down wind so quick you'd marvel ! The one 'd lose the *Lively Peggy* and the other 'd lose the prize ! And there it is.'

'A good man is hard to find, no doubt,' the Rector agreed. 'But surely Copestake is not the only man that can sail and will fight, even if you go no farther than Plymouth.'

Budgen grunted. 'I'd not go so far to fare worse,' he said. 'I've small thought o' Plymouth, nor no love for foreigners.'

The Rector was patient. 'Well, well, you've someone in your eye, I suppose. Who is it?'

Budgen's fingers beat a gentle tattoo on the mahogany. 'I'm not saying I've not,' he muttered. 'No, I'm not saying that either.'

But he stopped there, while the other wondered what ailed him that he did not speak. 'Then who is it that you propose, man ? Come, let us hear.'

Budgen did everything but meet his eye. 'We might do better,' he said darkly. 'But then again we might do worse. It's my thinking he'll fight if need be, and navigate he must — being as he is. But whether he's just according to your mind, sir, I won't say.' And then, 'I've insured my share,' he said, staring at the wall before him.

The Rector was startled. He moved uneasily in his chair. He looked at the man. 'Insured, have you ? At last ?'

'To be sure.'

'You never have before, Budgen !' The Rector looked thoughtful.

'No.' Budgen shifted uneasily in his chair. 'But your reverence has.'

'Certainly, certainly I have, and made no secret of it,

But the premium is high. I understood that that was why you would not do it.'

'It's my last stake,' the boat-builder muttered.

It was a natural thing to say, and a good reason to give, but Budgen did not say it in an outspoken way, and his manner troubled the Rector. The man had never insured his share before. He had made light of the risk, and he had sneered at the other's caution. The Rector had thought him a fool — penny wise and pound foolish; but he had not been surprised. He knew that the uneducated were loth to spend money where no immediate return was visible, and he had more than once pressed Budgen on the subject. But now that Budgen turned about and announced that he had insured — but with such an uneasy air and look as betrayed his embarrassment, and with eyes that never met the other's — the Rector did not like it. The reason the man gave was plausible, yet he mistrusted it. A suspicion, a very strange one, crossed his mind.

'Have you completed it?' he asked with a frown. 'Have you paid the premium?'

Budgen shook his head. 'None so silly!' he said. 'I'll pay when the brig's fitted. No, nor then, I won't. I'll not pay till the skipper's aboard and the blue flag's hoisted!'

'Umph! Well, it's your affair,' the Rector replied. But his face was grave. 'You've a right to insure, of course.'

'To be sure, I have.'

'Just so. Just so. Well, that brings us back to the skipper. Who is it you propose?'

'The one I'm thinking of?'

'Of course, man. Of course. Who else?'

'Well,' Budgen said, with a sidelong glance at him, 'it's one as you know. It's young Bligh!'

The Rector set down the glass he had raised to his lips. 'Young Bligh!' he repeated, in a tone of anger and astonishment. He was taken aback. 'And you'd trust him with that brig?'

'As soon as another !' Budgen said doggedly. 'Not as I'd trust Ozias, for I've tried Ozias and I've not tried this young sprig. But he's hard put to it, it's as much as he can do to scratch a living, and there's no one fights harder than him as has his back to the wall. I've watched him, too, and he's that way I'm thinking he'd like nothing better than hard knocks, and the harder the better.'

'But he drinks !' the Rector protested. He was strangely moved. 'He drinks, man ! He was broke for it ! Dismissed the Service, disgraced, ruined for it !'

Budgen forgot himself so far as to bring his hand down on the table. 'And how many King's men,' he cried, 'with the anchor on their buttons and the gold knobs on their shoulders would you get to take out a Letter o' Marque ! Tell me that, your reverence ! Not one, by God ! saving your presence. They'd spit in your face if you so much as opened it ! Ay, and threaten to break your bones for it ! There is precious little love lost 'twixt them and poor Jack as lifts the prizes under their hawses. One here and there, that's broke like this chap, may when it's Hobson's choice 'twixt the trade and starving ! But not another ! Why, if they saw the *Lively Peggy* sinking at her moorings it's much if they'd save the Jacks from drowning — and if they did they'd press them, though it's again the law ! All the same, for a desperate cruise, hit or miss, give me a King's man — broke !'

The Rector was watching him intently. 'You think it is a desperate cruise, then ?' he said.

Budgen's tone when he replied was both dogged and reckless, but his eyes did not meet the other's. 'Well, it's my last throw !' he said. 'And it's no olive branch I'm sending out, and no Quaker. He'll have his orders, and it's my thinking he'll bide by them !'

'He's married,' the Rector said. He spoke in a colourless voice.

'Sort o' married !' Budgen allowed, looking woodenly at

the wall before him. 'And maybe not much harm done there — if he don't come back.'

The Rector flinched. He was helping himself to wine, and the decanter tinkled against the glass. There was a moment of pregnant silence. Then, 'I don't approve,' he said. 'Do you hear, I don't approve. No, man, you — you must find someone else ! I won't have it.'

'I don't see as it matters much, even if he don't ——'

'I won't have it !' The Rector raised his voice. He was strangely agitated. 'I tell you I won't have it !' His face was flushed, though he had not drunk his quantum.

'Then you must find one yourself,' Budgen declared stubbornly. 'I've done my best — I've picked my man, and the fittest as I can find. And I should ha' thought 'twould have suited your reverence, too — and suited you well. But as it don't — you must do the job yourself,' he added in his surliest tone.

The Rector raised his glass and set it down untasted.

'No, I don't approve,' he repeated — but there was less finality in his tone. 'You hear that ?' It seemed as if, having hit on that phrase, he could say nothing else.

Budgen shrugged his shoulders. 'Then you must find your own man ! I wash my hands of it.' He was once more the old Budgen, crabbed and rude.

The Rector frowned. He drank, draining the glass thirstily, but his hand shook as he set it down. 'Have you spoken to him ?' he asked.

'Spoken ? To be sure I have, and he's willing as a maid ! Nor I don't know as it's anybody else's business. He's not a babby in arms, and it's a new thing to me if you're so much beholden to him. Do you think again, your reverence, and I'm fancying that you'll see it another way. He's willing and, Lord's sakes, how many cruises has Ozias sailed on and nobody lain awake — as I'm aware on.'

'He wasn't married,' the Rector muttered, his face averted.

'And there's married as have little to lose — and no great

loss,' Budgen replied. He had marked the drop in the Rector's tone, and he stole a covert glance at him, of which the Rector was uncomfortably aware. 'However,' he continued, shrugging his shoulders, 'your reverence knows your own business best, and Ozias being as he won't go, there's no more to be said.'

Dr. Portnal slid his glass up and down the polished table that reflected every object on its surface. His eyes followed the slow movement. 'It might give him a chance,' he said reluctantly. 'There is that, of course, Budgen. There is that. It might be — the best thing for him. There is that to be considered. I cannot deny it.'

Budgen agreed. 'It would be,' he said. 'And he sees it himself. To be sure he does.' His eyes were on the Rector now, and there was something like derision in them.

But for the moment the other ignored him. He sat silent, his gaze still following the mechanical movement of his hand; and his brow was damp. At last, 'Is he likely — to keep sober?' he asked in a troubled voice. 'It's a great responsibility.' He spoke as if he laboured under the weight of it himself.

'For what I know,' the boat-builder replied, 'he's a Rechabite! Swore off, I hear, and the old man too. No one's picked him up for a score of Sundays, and a score to that. Town talk goes he's as good as a Wesleyan.'

The Rector held a Wesleyan and a man who could not carry his liquor in about equal disdain, but that was not to the purpose now. He gave way, but it was with a sigh. 'Well,' he muttered, 'if you are sure that you know of no other.'

'Not a soul that's fit, and the men will follow.'

'Are you sure that they will ship with him?'

'I'll answer for it, they will!'

The Rector stared at his glass. 'Well, so be it,' he said dully. 'Though — though you understand, Budgen,' he added, 'he's not the man I'd choose myself.'

'I understand,' Budgen replied. A smile flickered on his lips.

'And I would not have him now,' the Rector repeated sharply, 'if there were another. You understand that?'

'To be sure. To be sure!'

'Then' — the Rector moved uneasily in his chair — 'we'll hope it will turn out for the best. What — what do you pay him now?'

'Fifteen shillings.'

The Rector winced. 'If he's master he'll have his share?'

'To be sure. They have their risks down to the cook-boy.'

That was something, the other thought. And what risk there was — and there was no gain without risk — was worth the man's while. It was his chance, and was anyone justified in withholding it from him?

But when Budgen, after discussing money details, had taken himself away, the Rector walked up and down the room, and he was troubled — more troubled, he told himself again and again, than he had any cause to be. He knew what ailed him, though he tried hard to persuade himself that there was no ground for his doubts. Only — only he wished with all his heart that Budgen had not said that word about the insurance.

To suppose that the man had thought to tempt him was absurd; he could not think so ill of him as to suspect that he had an evil purpose — either in the act or in the mention of it. But the doubt, slight as it was, clung to the Rector's mind — clung like a burr, and he wished with all his heart that the insurance had not been named.

For, putting that dark and certainly baseless thought aside, surely his consent was justified! It was the best thing for the young man that could happen. If fortune favoured him, he would be the gainer in money and character, he would stand before the world as something of a man again. And the risk? After all, it was no more than the risk that men in the Service ran every day, and that Bligh himself had run

for years. So that if any mischance happened, it was no more than might have befallen him any day during the whole time he had served at sea ! That was clear, demonstrable, not to be denied by anyone.

And yet — he was troubled. That insurance effected at this late hour and for the first time — what did it mean ? Why was a man as penurious and close-fisted as Budgen, and at this moment in sore straits for money — why was he insuring when he had never insured before ? Because this was his last stake ? Possibly — that seemed to be and surely was a good reason. But the Rector, his misgivings once awakened, could not but see, though it was a shocking thing even to think of, that the man might have another object. With peace so near it might suit him to make sure of the war-value of the brig, and perhaps a good deal more. A shocking suspicion ? Yes, a shocking, a revolting suspicion ! Of a thing vile, criminal, black as hell !

Yet the Rector had heard of such things. Of hints conveyed through the smugglers who passed to and fro at will: of vessels doomed before they left port, of Letters of Marque waylaid and captured on the day they reached their cruising-grounds.

He passed his silk bandanna across his brow. And yet for a suspicion so shocking, so monstrous, what grounds had he ? None, absolutely none ! And presently with an effort he put the thought from him, telling himself that he was giving a heated imagination too much play; that it was fancy only that had found in Budgen's manner that evening a furtiveness new to him and an uneasiness that seemed to smack of guilt. The thought was absurd. The man was not a villain, the Rector told himself, nor business a melodrama.

Absurd ! Ay, and monstrous. And yet as he went up the stairs to the drawing-room he could not refrain — for no man is master of his mind — from thinking what a relief from annoyance, what a solution of difficulties it would be if something did happen. If Bligh — if his son-in-law did

not return. If the whole ghastly business of his daughter's *mésalliance* were ended at a blow. He was sure that the thought had not weighed with him when he gave his consent, that it had had no influence on his mind. But his brow was damp. He passed his handkerchief across it.

CHAPTER XIX

THOUGH the eye that will not see has often a vision of the truth too accurate for the owner's comfort, this did not apply to the picture of his daughter's life that Dr. Portnal conjured up, only to shudder at it. The home of the young couple, though it depended on a pittance and was straitened by poverty, was, as we know, neither squalid nor mean. It lacked the luxuries and even the comforts of the Rectory, and space was scanty and room precious. But the neatness that discipline had taught the soldier the limits of ship-life had imposed on the seaman; and to neatness, the woman, casting her part into the common stock, added the gift of refinement — a touch here and a change there. The floors might be bare and the walls whitened, but taste made of bareness a thing not unsightly. When the sun shone through the low casements, and the salt breeze, blowing fresh from the Channel, entered by the doorway and stirred the sea-tang hanging on the wall, or when, the red curtains drawn, the firelight fell on the Captain netting in his corner, while Peggy, with a sparing hand, measured the tea into the brown pot, many a finer room might have seemed less home-like.

True, there were tasks to be done that the girl-wife had never thought to do. But love and youth lightened these for her, and if the men had had their way her dainty hands had never been roughened, nor her feet found cause to flag. And Peggy was true woman, and to care for her men, to cosset them and to spoil them, was, in her day at any rate, the woman's instinct, inbred in her through generations. So after a while, and merrily, she dethroned the men. She

set aside their clumsy efforts, derided their methods and laughed them out of employment. Presently they revolved round her, willing to help but afraid to step in. She swept, she mended, she baked, she singed her thumb trying the heat of the oven — and licked it — and they bore it.

But it was a sad day for the Captain when, in default of the hired woman, she washed his first shirt. It might have been better washed, the frills more neatly ironed, but there were tears in the old man's eyes when he donned it. It was to him a sacred thing and an amulet. Harmless, amiable, God-fearing, the old soldier had but the one weakness, and against this he was now doubly armed, alike by remorse for the past and by reverence for the innocent life that had brought hope into his old heart.

Of course Peggy had her troubles; and buoyant as she was by nature, and brightened by youth and hope, there were stray hours when her spirits drooped. She was parted from those beside whom she had lived from infancy. The home that had been hers was forbidden to her. Her sister shunned her, her father froze her with cold courtesy. Nor was it pleasant to be sent to Coventry by her world; to be met with a distant bow where a laughing greeting had been hers, to be taught in the street where all knew her that in the opinion of her equals she had lost her caste. But, though wilful, the girl was no fool. She had reckoned on these things and discounted them. She had set the loss against the gain and held herself well paid. Not in her worst moments did she — happy in this beyond her deserts — regret her bargain. She was often anxious and sometimes fearful, foreseeing a new expense that must presently fall on the little household. But for compensation she read in the men's eyes a deeper tenderness, a more assiduous thought for her; a watchfulness to save her and spare her that provoked the young wife now to tears and now to laughter.

If only that trouble, fraught with delicious hopes as well as fears, had been all! But it was not. A woman's love

has keen eyes: it does not sleep. Already she knew her husband through and through, knew his weakness as well as his strength, and mothered the one as she worshipped the other. But even his affection could not blind her to the fact that he was not content. The home satisfied her, but it could not satisfy him. She saw this ever more plainly: saw him grow with every month more moody and less gay. He looked at her and she was happy, but he looked away from her and she knew that his thoughts strayed, and she guessed too clearly their direction. She knew his mind, and knew it set on things that meant little to her but almost everything to him. For — it was natural no doubt — Bligh could not accept his lot, he could not sit down with failure; he rebelled morning and evening, down-sitting and up-rising, against fate. Poverty, and especially her poverty, ate into his heart, and, alas ! at times spoiled his temper. Now and again — not often and never unrepented — his humour showed in a hasty word, a sharp look, and she saw clear to the discontent that teased him. More often it betrayed itself in sudden changes of mood, in a restless activity, in the seaman's habit of tramping up and down his narrow confines.

And she lived so close to him that she could not but see it all. Nor did she lack confirmation of her fears, were it needed. The Captain, too, was watching, and was anxious; she discerned it, she read it in his eyes. And by and by there came a time when, with alarm, she saw the restlessness of the one and the anxiety of the other redoubled. She scented a crisis, she feared everything, but she knew not what; and one morning when Charles, after eating his breakfast, had hastened down to the Cove — he seemed to be unusually busy — she could be silent no longer.

'What is it?' she asked the old man, attacking him with an abruptness that routed him before the battle was joined. 'What is it? I am not blind. He is unhappy and he is afraid. He is thinking of something. What is it? You can't keep it from me.'

He tried feebly to evade her. 'What should there be, my dear?' he said. But he had not the wit to hide his dismay. 'You — you frighten yourself — indeed, you frighten yourself for nothing! And — and at this time you should not!'

But she was not deceived. 'No,' she replied, 'that is no use. Tell me! I must know some time!'

He wavered, parleyed, and was lost. 'It is just a thought,' he pleaded. 'There is nothing in it. Nothing settled, my dear! And in your state ——'

'Never mind my state!' she cried, her eyes wide with alarm. 'Don't you see that you are keeping me in suspense? What is it, this nothing? You have said too much to hide it now.'

'But he will tell you himself,' he protested. 'When anything is settled he will tell you! Of course he will, my dear.' But his fencing was useless; her eyes frightened him, he told her. 'It is only something that has been suggested about the — the Peggy, my dear. Budgen has — has offered her to him.'

'The Peggy!' she exclaimed, holding her head with both hands and staring at him. 'Offered it to him? What do you mean?'

'To take her out — on the next cruise; you know,' the poor man explained.

Her hands fell. 'Ah!' she said.

'But nothing — nothing is settled. Nothing! It's all in the air, my dear. He will tell you himself before anything is done!'

'And he would leave me!' she cried. She rose up, a very flame of indignation in her eyes. 'He would leave me! He wishes to go. Oh, I know he does. He wishes to go!'

The Captain was beside himself. 'I don't know! I don't know!' he babbled. 'I ought not to have told you!'

She made no outcry beyond that: she added nothing. She sat down again, sat motionless, still and tragic, staring at the bare walls, seeing nothing but her own loneliness, the man's

selfishness, his fickleness ! It was for this, for this — to be abandoned on the first temptation — that she had given her all, given up all, relinquished home, family, everything ! For this ! She stood for no more than this in his life !

The poor Captain was appalled at what he had done, and he tried to shield himself. 'You will not tell him ?' he begged. 'He will tell you himself — to-day, my dear, I dare say.'

At that pride came to her aid, and 'No,' she said, 'I shall not tell him. He will tell me himself. Of course,' she added, but in spite of pride her lip trembled — 'he will tell me.'

And he did tell her that night, noting, no doubt, some change in her manner, and guessing that she suspected. And it was very tenderly with his arm about her that he told her: remorsefully, rather letting her guess his wishes than disclosing them; owning freely that he had no right to go, that in even entertaining the plan he was to blame. And as with her face turned from him she listened, giving him no encouragement, and making no reply, 'My own,' he pleaded, 'I would not do it — indeed, I would not do it at this time if I could choose. I would not leave you alone with that before you ! But it is now or never, to leave or to take. I may never have the chance again. They talk of peace in the summer, and with peace —' He broke off, but his gesture of despair betrayed more of his feelings, of his hopes, of his aspirations, than he knew. It declared as plainly as if he had spoken that with peace vanished his last forlorn hope of rehabilitation. Still she did not speak, and he had to go on, setting before her, baldly rather than with any colouring, the advantages he hoped to win, the increased pay, the chance of gain if a prize were taken, the employment higher, at least, than that he held. Finally — but by this time his voice dragged — he dwelt upon the shortness of the cruise. He would be at sea no more than six weeks; it would soon go.

It would pass. He would be back before — before the event, he hoped.

‘But you don’t go for these things,’ she said, breaking her silence at last, though she kept her face turned from his, and her voice was cold. ‘You don’t deceive me. You don’t go for these things.’

‘If I go,’ he said, trying to speak lightly.

‘If you go?’ she cried, speaking as she had never spoken to him before. ‘But you mean to go! But it is not for these things, I know. I know why you go, and why you wish to go.’

He temporised. ‘My dear, I hardly know that I wish to go.’

‘Oh, yes, you wish to go!’ she rejoined bitterly. ‘But not for any of the things you name.’ You think to regain what you have lost. You dream of — of righting yourself. That is all that matters to you. And for that — that dream, that chance in a million you will fight — fight desperately! Oh! I know you. You will run all risks, take all chances for that. For that! While I wait here!’ She strove to retain her self-control, but her voice rose to a tragic note. ‘While I wait here, and wait and wait? No, sir, it is impossible. It is wicked, wicked, and I will not have it! It was not in the bargain, sir.’ She tried to wrest herself from him. ‘It was not for this, to be abandoned, and slighted, to be alone and wait, that I gave up all! I gave it up for you, and I will have you and keep you. I will not lose you! You shall not go. You have not the right to go!’

‘Then I will not go,’ he said.

‘You shall not!’ she declared, anger still uppermost in her. ‘I will not bear it.’

He swallowed something, he strove to play the man. ‘Very well,’ he said, with as much cheerfulness as he could command. ‘Then I will not go. Be it so, dear. Be it so, Peggy. And who knows but some day some other chance may come. We will settle it so, and — and no more about

it.' He forced a laugh. 'You know me too well, Peggy,' he said. And he tried to rally her. 'I have no chance with you. You read me like a book.'

'I should know you,' she said sombrely. 'You are my husband.'

'Then look up, dear,' he said. 'It is over and done with. Smile at me now.'

She clung to him. 'Then you will not go?' she cried, melting. 'You promise me? You do promise me, Charles? And you forgive me? Whom have I but you?'

He swore that he had nothing to forgive; he swore that she was right, and gradually and slowly he caressed her into something like tranquillity — hiding his own pangs, swallowing his disappointment manfully. And presently she slept; her bosom still heaving, the tears still on her cheek. Her arm was about him as if she would assure herself, even in her sleep, of his presence. And now and again in her dreams she breathed stormily, the tempest but half spent.

But the man lay long awake, fighting his battle, subduing his will, and striving to set love above self. For it was no easy victory that he had to make good. For him Budgen's offer had raised a very castle in Spain. It had laid a foundation for impossible things, and he had built on that foundation, built high and splendidly, ignoring the probable, losing himself in airy visions, confident of the unlikely and the romantic. Weak men might fail, might come home empty-handed; but he would not fail. They counted odds, had petty gain for motive, but he who had everything to win would not count heads. There was nothing that he would not dare, nothing of which, once more at sea, with the sweet brig and the swaying deck under his feet, he would not be capable. He had built high and swiftly; he had seen his name flame on an astonished world. A privateer — no more, and little enough he knew that the Service recked of such! Ay, but his should be such a privateer as men had never dreamed of, never visioned since the days of the fabled and

the glorious Fortunatus Wright who, when the navy had failed and sailed away, held the Mediterranean and the Sicilies in fee !

And all this and his high hopes he must resign — for her sake and the sake of the babe that was coming ! He must put away his dream, decline ambition, trample on his last chance. The splendid edifice that fancy had reared, that had charmed his longing eyes for days, wavered, shook, nay, melted into grey mist, leaving all empty, cold and comfortless. Or no, God forgive him for the thought, not comfortless ! He had her, and he loved her and she was precious to him, endeared by gratitude as well as by love. But the man in him prized honour also, and the good word of his fellows, never so highly valued as when lost; and the struggle was hard and bitter. To win through to the resignation that he had promised her, to accept his lot with cheerfulness, and a mien that should never reproach her — this was a hard task for one of his nature; and again and again he rebelled against his fate, though he strove to stifle the discontent that would rise in him. No wonder that sleep was long in coming, that he moved restlessly, staring with wakeful eyes into the darkness. But at last he slept.

When he awoke, roused by some movement near him, he missed Peggy from his side. It was early, the room was still shadowy, and he sat up, sleepy and wondering. Then he saw her. She was standing, a thin wrapper about her, gazing through the window, her figure outlined against the grey light that fell on a patch of bare floor, and on the wall beyond it. He called her by name. 'What is it, dear !' he asked. 'Is anything the matter ?'

'Nothing,' she said. She turned from the window, and came to his side of the bed and leant over him, putting her arms about him. 'Nothing, nothing,' she repeated, but there was a tone and a solemnity in her voice that drove from him the last remains of sleep. 'Nothing is the matter, dear. All is well. Very well.'

'But,' he asked, startled and perplexed, 'why are you up?'

'Because I awoke and I could not sleep until I had spoken to you. I have been looking at the mist on the water, Charles. You can see nothing. The sea and the point, all are blotted out. You can see nothing. But they are there, we know that; we know that they are there, and as surely as I hold you now the sun will rise and we shall see them again — with the light upon them!'

'Of course we shall, dear,' he said, bewildered. 'Why not? And you are cold, you are shivering! Get into bed!'

'When I have told you,' she answered. But she was slow to go on. She drew his head to her heart and held him closely. Then, 'Charles,' she said, 'I was wrong last night, and I see it now — selfish and wicked, thinking only of myself, thinking, oh, so meanly! But to-day I am brave. I am myself, I have looked into the mist, and I know that the light is behind it, I know that the light will shine through presently. I have learned my lesson and I thank God for it. You shall go, you must go. Your wife shall be no coward, no drawback to you. Nor your child. You must go.'

He was awake with a vengeance now. 'Peggy! Peggy!' he cried. 'You do not mean it? You are not yourself, dear!'

'But I do mean it, and I am myself. I mean it with all my heart. Do you feel my heart, dear, beating against you? Is it not beating strongly, calmly? No, you must go, for my sake as well as your own. For I see clearly now. I see that it is only so that I can keep you and be sure of you, sure of your love and worthy of it.'

'But — but have you thought?' he protested. For, oh, he could not accept this! He was shaken, shaken by a very rapture of love and remorse. How could he, how dare he take advantage of her — and of this? Of the love and self-sacrifice before which he felt himself so mean, so small, and his ambitions and his hopes a nothing? 'Have you thought?

For there is a risk. You know, dear, there is. I may not, you know I may not ——’

‘Come back? No, I know,’ she said. Her voice trembled, but it grew full and strong again. ‘I know, Charles. And have I thought? Oh! have I not? You may not come back. But do you not see, dear, dear love, that I lose you either way, and better, oh, better,’ she cried, tears in her voice, ‘far better this way! I give you that I may keep you — keep your love, living or dead, keep you whole, entire, all my own! No, Charles, you must go, you must go!’ She repeated it, swaying herself a little, holding him closer and closer to her in a passion of abnegation. ‘And God give you back to me, as I believe He will! The mist may lie long, but it will rise some day, and you will be mine, my very own!’

He was in her arms, but in his heart he was at her feet, humbling himself in the dust before her, owning the majesty of her love. ‘Oh, Peggy! Peggy!’ he cried in a tone that was precious to her. ‘What shall I say to you? How shall I be worthy of you? Oh, my dear, I am selfish. I am selfishness itself, if I take you at your word. I am a brute to wish to go. Think! Think again, dear. Say nothing now. Let us wait. There is a risk. God knows there is a risk if I go.’

‘You will go to regain what you have lost,’ she said firmly. ‘You will go to do your duty. I understand, I know, Charles. You go to fight; I stay to wait and pray. I am a sailor’s wife and not the first. But I have counted the cost and I hold you cheap at it.’ She met his eyes and tried to smile, nay, she did smile. ‘I see clearly now. There is but this one way for you and for me.’

He held her to him, but all that the man, unmanned, could say was ‘Peggy! Peggy!’ as he drew her face down to his breast and held her close. ‘Oh, Peggy! Peggy!’

But his clasp told her all, and already she had some foretaste of her reward.

CHAPTER XX

AND giving, the young wife did not give by halves. Love's wisdom told her that a grudging gift is a vain sacrifice, and heavy as her heart was she did not let her fears cloud her face. She forced herself to be cheerful, she smiled across the breakfast table, and — last effort of courage — when the meal was over she sang as she went about her household work. The old man was deceived, for he was a simple soul; and for her husband, though she could not impose upon him who had so lately read her heart, her fortitude inspired and her cheerfulness consoled him. As her eyes followed him down the path to the Cove she marked the lightness of his step, and she thanked God for the courage that had been given to her.

But the bravest spirit has its moments of weakness. There followed days when the sea did not, a shield of blinding silver, mirror the sun's splendour, when hail rattled against the streaming panes, and the south-wester, storming by the walls, beat down the fuchsia beside the door. Days, too, when fog grey and depressing hid the world, and the sound of the caulking-mallets rising out of the mist seemed to listening ears as the knell of hammers on coffins. And he was absent and busy, borne away on the stream of life, engaged every hour in the job of fitting-out the brig, of checking stores, of setting up rigging. He hurried to and fro, and the day was too short for him, too short for fears and well-nigh for regret.

But for Peggy the woman's task of waiting had already begun. She sat at home, and she was alone. She might

make and mend for him, she might bend over the stout rig-and-furrow that grew upon her twinkling needles; but she must needs think. Though she let no row fall that was not close and true as love could make it, the task was still too short. And, the task done, what remained to her but to think and tremble at her thoughts?

All this she had the strength to hide from him. Welcoming him, noon and night, with smiles, she listened with hard-won patience to the tale of the day's doings, to the successes and failures that filled his thoughts, but for her ranked only as they retarded or advanced the inevitable parting. She questioned, smiled, and played her part, though there were times when the ordeal was almost more than she could bear, when she could have screamed aloud. There were other times when, her heart full to bursting, she longed to give way, to weep her fill and be comforted.

And one day when the preparations were well advanced the sympathy that she read in Charlotte Bicester's eyes proved too much for her. It was a Sunday afternoon and the visitor had come in when the men were abroad. Charlotte marked the quivering lip, the fluttering hands, the piteous eyes, saw that there was something amiss and questioned Peggy. In a few minutes the tale was told and the young wife was pouring out her soul in her friend's arms.

Charlotte was never slow to wax hot, and she flamed out. 'But he must not go!' she cried, as if that closed the matter. 'He shall not go! It is cruel, wicked, most wicked, child! He shall not leave you.'

'No, no,' Peggy sobbed. 'He must go.'

'He must not!' Charlotte declared, fired with indignation in her friend's cause. 'I never heard of such a thing! At this moment when you are — no! No! Certainly he cannot go. I will see to it, dear.'

But that was not what Peggy wanted. Pity she claimed and a word of sympathy — and a good cry. But no one must arraign him, no one must come between them. The

storm sank as quickly as it had arisen, she disengaged herself, and mopped her eyes. 'No, dear,' she said with dignity, 'we have considered it, and he is right to go. Quite right. I wish it. I would not keep him if I could.'

'Not keep him ! I don't believe it !'

'No, certainly not,' Peggy said, bristling up, and as ready to fight as she had been to weep. 'No, certainly not. We are in full agreement about it, Charlotte. He must go and he is right to go. But,' she added, weakening and turning tearful eyes on her friend, 'it almost breaks my heart to let him go.'

'And yet you let him go ?'

'Of course ! But you cannot understand.'

Charlotte thought that she did understand. She did not believe Peggy. 'The man is a wretch !' she thought. 'An unfeeling, ungrateful wretch to talk of leaving her !' Still, she ceased to argue and confined herself to administering the comfort that Peggy needed and that gradually brought back a smile to her face.

None the less Charlotte left the cottage, determined that the thing should not be. Her friend should not be sacrificed, she should not be racked and tormented. Heavens, had not the child suffered enough ? Had she not given up enough, offered enough, father, sister, friends, position on the altar of this man ? Was she never to have peace ! Charlotte burned to speak her mind to some one, and in her indignation would have gone that moment to the Cove and brought the offender to book. But Peggy, smiling through her tears and much the better for the break-down, saw her from the door, and Charlotte dared not turn towards the Cove lest the other should divine her purpose. Still her resolution held ; it was but putting off the matter for a few hours, she thought.

And then in Beremouth, at the point where the road that climbed the headland left the street she met Sir Albery, coming, as she supposed, from the Rectory, and in a trice and

with her usual impulsiveness she decided that he was the proper person to interfere. A moment's thought might have induced even Charlotte to doubt the wisdom of this, but she did not allow herself the moment. She poured out her story, and heated to a white heat by her recital, 'Isn't it a burning shame?' she cried. 'Isn't it the last straw?' Then as he did not reply, 'Did you know of this?' she asked, prepared to denounce him if he differed from her. 'Monstrous, I call it! Surely, you didn't or you would have done something?'

Wyke's face was grave. 'I heard two days ago,' he said, 'that he was likely to go.'

'And you have done nothing!'

'I?' His tone said as plainly as possible — 'What have I to do with it?'

And that would have closed the matter for most people, but Charlotte was of stouter stuff. 'Yes, you!' she retorted. 'Why not? You were fond of her?'

He reddened with vexation. 'Miss Bicester,' he said, 'you go too far! You forget that — that Mrs. Bligh is another man's wife.'

'Oh!' Charlotte rose in her scorn. 'And that being so, you wash your hands of her! You don't care what happens to her! That's it, is it?'

Really the girl was beyond bearing! Exasperated, he ground the point of his stick into the ground. 'But what are you in it?' he protested, with an irritation that was natural enough in the circumstances. 'What is it to you, Miss Bicester? Why are you forever taking up their cause and — and troubling about them?'

It was Charlotte's turn to redden. 'Why?' she exclaimed. 'Why? I thought I had told you once. Because I was her friend, and I am not like some, I stick. I don't turn my back and say it is no business of mine, because she's down! Because she's poor and all her fine friends have sent her to Coventry! She's going to have a baby — I suppose I should

not know it, but I do — and this will about kill her ! And am I to stand by and do nothing like all the rest, like her good-for-nothing sister, whom I would like to shake ! And like — well, I won't say that. Only I won't stand, for one, and see this. It will kill her. Do you understand that ?'

For a moment Charlotte's anger raised her almost to the pitch of comeliness, and Wyke eyed her whimsically, discovering something new and surprising in her. 'There are not many friends like you, Miss Bicester,' he said.

'Then I would not call them friends,' she retorted. 'Friends, indeed ! I would not give that for them !' and she snapped her fingers. 'But we are off the point. The point is, Sir Albery, are you going to do anything ? That is what I want to know ?'

He hesitated. 'It is a fair risk,' he said. 'I don't see that it is any more.'

But she had her answer. 'If it were his risk, may be ! You may depend upon it, it would not trouble me — fair or unfair. But it is her risk that I'm thinking about. He may not be worth much, but she has bought him dearly, and is she to lose him ? Is she to live in fear and anguish, for it is nothing better, and be broken-hearted at last ? The man has the feelings of a stone to think of it ! No one but a brute would treat her so !'

'But I thought,' he said, smiling, 'that you liked him ?'

Charlotte cooled down. 'Well, I did,' she admitted.

'Then why do you think so ill of him now ?'

She hesitated. 'Because I've seen her,' she said. 'And she is breaking her heart about it. The man has no right to go !'

'But what can I do ? What do you want me to do ?'

'Speak to him. Put it before him ! Tell him what you think of him ! What her friends think of him.'

Wyke frowned. 'You don't know what you ask,' he said. 'Come between husband and wife ? And I — I of all people ? You don't know what you are asking.'

But Charlotte was firm. 'Yes, I do,' she said. 'I ask you to act, and I say you have the right to act. You more than any one.'

'Surely less than any one,' he protested, colouring. 'You put me in a false position. I step out of my place! Step out of it damnably! Damnably!' he repeated. 'It is impossible.'

'And yet you will do it?'

'If I do, I am a fool!'

'Then be a fool!' cried this odd girl. 'And you may be thankful all your life that you were!'

He looked down the quiet Sunday street in which they were the only loiterers, and annoyance was written on his face. 'Well, I'll see,' he said at last, and grudgingly. 'But I have told you what I think. I think the whole thing wrong. Quite wrong!'

'And yet you'll do it,' she replied. 'I leave it to you.' And before he could repeat his refusal, she turned and hurried away, leaving him to digest the business as best he might.

'I shall do nothing of the kind,' he said, looking after her; and having given a minute to gloomy reflection, he followed her along the street. But when he had covered a hundred yards at a pace that grew slower with every yard, he stopped. 'D — n the girl!' he muttered. He turned and went back, and with dragging steps he made for the churchyard, and the walk that ran over the headland. He could not make up his mind. He did not mean to do anything — the girl was mad! But he might as well go that way and — and see. She had put it on him, confound her — and if anything happened? He had an unhappy vision of Peggy, white-faced, piteous, fearstricken, staring at him with appealing eyes.

Once he stood. And once he turned and went back a few paces. The thing was absurd; it was no business of his. But he went on. Five minutes saw him over the point, and

within sight of the cottage; and there, as luck would have it, he saw Bligh coming up from the Cove, and still on the farther side of the wicket-gate. There the man was, and if the thing was to be done, if it were not altogether impossible — Wyke quickened his pace that he might meet the other before he entered.

'Can I have a word with you?' he said. He would fain have said it in a tone of goodwill, but he spoke with constraint.

Bligh on his side did not bless the meeting. Chance had from time to time brought the two men face to face in the town, and they had passed with a silent greeting. But since the day when they had met at the wedding they had never spoken. To escape, however, was impossible. 'Yes,' he replied not without dignity, 'if you wish it.'

'I hear,' Wyke said, 'that you are going out with the Peggy. May I ask if that is true?'

Bligh nodded.

'It is true, then?'

'It is. What of it?' He was on his guard, watchful and a little suspicious.

'Only this,' Wyke replied, hardening his heart, 'but I think it is a thing that should weigh with you, and I think it is a thing that I have a right to say, Mr. Bligh. I can enter into your feelings, and I understand why you wish to go. No, hear me out, I beg,' he continued, as he saw that Bligh was preparing to interrupt him. 'There must be risk, and I dare say a good deal of risk. Have you the right to run that risk? Your wife ——'

'Oh, that's it,' Bligh said, not very pleasantly. 'That's it, is it? You are thinking of her, Sir Albergy.'

Wyke's colour rose, but he answered firmly. 'Yes,' he said, 'I am thinking of her.'

Bligh could hardly have been blamed if he had resented the intrusion; indeed the words, 'Had you not better mind your own business?' rose to his lips. But his better nature

or his respect for the man, or possibly the scruples that he had felt prevailed. He stood a moment silent. Then, 'Is that all?' he asked.

'It covers all,' the other answered. 'I think that you ought to consider her. I think you ought to remember, Mr. Bligh, that your life is no longer yours to risk, and that you have no right to risk it or to inflict on her the anguish and the possible loss that this venture may cost her. No, man — you have not the right!' he repeated more warmly.

'And I might answer,' Bligh rejoined — but he said it with a smile — 'that you have not the right to come between us.'

Sir Albery winced. 'To come between you, no,' he said. 'God forbid! But to speak to you as I am speaking, yes.' And then with a fine simplicity, 'I loved her,' he said. 'She has chosen you, but I loved her and I would spare her.'

Bligh nodded. 'I own your right,' he said gravely. 'But what if she wishes — if it is her own wish that I should go?'

'In that case there is no more to be said. If she wishes it.'

'We will ask her,' Bligh rejoined, rising to the other's level. 'She shall tell you herself what she wishes.'

Wyke had not counted on this, and he drew back. He had a horror of facing her, and a dread of what he would see. 'Oh, but,' he protested, 'I did not mean — if you tell me it is so of course —'

But Bligh waved that aside. 'We will ask her,' he repeated.

He signed to the other to go first, and Wyke, with mingled anger and vexation at the position in which he had placed himself, gave way. He had prepared himself for hard words, for a clash, but he had not foreseen this, and he felt himself caught. He was a shy as well as a proud man, and he would have given a large sum to be spared the scene that awaited him. But he could not refuse, and he passed through the gate that the other held back.

Bligh pushed open the door. 'Are you there, Peggy?' he

asked, raising his voice. 'I am bringing you a visitor. Here is Sir Albery Wyke. He wishes to ask you a question.'

Peggy was bending over the table, busy about some household task, and she had just that much warning and no more. She looked up, she saw her old lover hesitating on the threshold, and the blood flew to her face. She had not spoken to him since the day when he had stood behind her at her marriage, a grim, silent witness, and memories of that day and of his suit clothed her with shame. But though her face burned she held up her head bravely, and Bligh told himself with pride that he would not have had her look other than she did.

Probably Sir Albery suffered more than she suffered. He bowed, muttering something incoherent about an intrusion, and her husband's wish. He turned resentfully to Bligh.

'It's about my sailing with the *Peggy*,' Bligh said. Of the three he was the most at his ease. 'Sir Albery is troubled about it, and it is good of him to be so. I have told him that I have left the decision to you, and that if you are against my sailing I will not go!'

Peggy knitted her brow. 'Well?' she said. If she understood she did not show it.

'He wishes to hear from your lips, dear, if you are willing?'

'That you should go?'

'Yes.'

Peggy did not blench. 'But I have told you so,' she said, frowning. The blush had faded from her cheek and she seemed to Sir Albery to be pale and changed. But she spoke with decision. 'It is at my wish that he does go,' she continued. 'If it had lain with him he would not have gone. But, for me — would you have me keep him here idle, wasted, clerking for that man? Do you think that he was made for that, to live out his life under a cloud, to pay all his life for a single mistake, to rust down there with the old moorings and the worn-out boats? Do you think,' she

repeated, her voice rising proudly, 'that I married him for that ? To fetter him and bind him, my love no better than the green weed that hangs about those rotting timbers ? Shall I take all and give nothing ? No, let him go !' Peggy's voice rang with something approaching exultation. 'Let him go whatever it cost ! Better, far better to lose him, if it be God's will, than to be a stay and a clog upon him ! Let him go and let him prove, if the chance be given him, that the world has been unjust to him !'

Bligh turned to Sir Alberty. He smiled. 'Are you satisfied ?' he asked. But his voice was unsteady.

'There is no more to be said,' Wyke muttered. He was amazed, silenced, awe-stricken. 'God give you and her a good deliverance.' Habit put the words into his mouth, and he used them and added nothing to them. Nor did he make any show of leave-taking, but turned and went out as in a dream.

They had risen above him, far above him ! Or she had ! He felt it, he owned it. She had reached a plane beyond his strength, if not his conception, and he acknowledged it with awe. As he returned over the point he met men who saluted him respectfully, but he went by them unseeing. That was not the Squire's custom, and the men stared after him, and saw that as he climbed the hill he made strange odd gestures with his cane. They thought him mazed, and they wondered.

CHAPTER XXI

BUDGEN'S COVE lay so snugly sheltered behind the headland that it kept its secrets, and Budgen was no talker. But there are things that cannot be hidden long. The bilge-pumps and the caulkers' mallets had voices if Budgen had not, and the reek of the first sizzling tar-kettle had barely got the better of the tang of the seaweed and the various smells of the fore-shore before it was rumoured on the other side of the point that something was afoot. From that to the knowledge that the *Lively Peggy* was to sail was but a step.

The news made a stir that was not confined to Beremouth. It reached the ship-chandlers in Plymouth and the armourers in Devonport; it moved the fish-curers on the giddy steeps of Saltash. For Letters of Marque were good customers. They sailed well-armed, for fighting, when it could not be avoided, was their trade, and well-found, for something like equality reigned aboard and the fo'c'sle looked to live on more than hard-tack and salt horse. Men with samples, men with lists, men with oily voices, shadowed Budgen, way-laid him on his doorstep, and were heartily cursed for their pains.

But that which was a mere question of profit to the Three Towns was for Beremouth a thing of both profit and pride. The taverns that of late had scored much on the slates behind their doors looked to have them cleared out of the minor advances — and other scores run up, for would not every soul in the place drink to the success of the venture? Then if all went well there would be more money when the crew

came back with lined pockets. Coopers hooped casks, and sail-makers, squatting on their hams, sewed cloths; for others there were odd jobs about the brig and always the hope of a prize to flood the little port with gold, or the things that made gold — laces and cognac, Lyons silks and Bordeaux wines — a flood that would irrigate many a thirsty channel.

But in Beremouth itself the hope of profit stood second to pride. The town was bestirring itself to wipe off its disgrace. It was lifting its head again, to compete with Falmouth and Plymouth and Dartmouth. It was once again sending forth its ship to harass the hated foreigners who closed their ports to its pilchards and herrings; and sending it forth with just as much chance of a prize as its neighbours. Not a man on the quay littered with weedy fish-crates and crab-pots but saw just beyond the offing a main strewn with merchantmen and golden with argosies, all waiting to be taken by the first comer. And then how great the glory, how fine the story, how shrill the cock-crowing over Yealmp-ton and Torbay and Brixton ! There would not be a tavern, a Sailors' Rest or a Hole in the Wall from Portland Bill to the Manacles that would not ring with the tale of a good capture, wiping out the unlucky memory of the last fiasco.

Men held their heads higher, and walked more briskly, smiling as they walked. Old salts not often seen upon the street, shy, ringleted men who lodged in Beremouth, holding it safer than Plymouth where the press-gang worked, showed themselves openly, spat on their hands and sought secret interviews with Budgen. The very children chanted that the *Peggy* was going out, and on most days there would be half a dozen groups watching from the churchyard walk the workers in the Cove.

But fame is a fickle thing, and though the name was in all mouths, not one in a hundred, strange to say, thought of the girl now living humbly in their midst, in whose honour the brig had been christened. Some were ignorant of the fact. Others had forgotten it. Her nine-days' romance

had sunk merged in dull every-day life, and if one here or there did recall her association with the thing of beauty that day by day, as casks and bales went aboard, floated lower in the water, it was much.

Amid all this one secret was well kept. Men wondered who was to command. Budgen was dumb, the Rector was too formidable to be questioned, and the Cove was as ignorant as the town. Budgen had sworn to Dr. Portnal that the crew would sail with Bligh, but the wish had been father to the thought, for not a man from Barney Toll to the galley-drudge had been consulted. Nine out of ten believed that, wife or no wife, Ozias would sail. That was the common talk. But when Ozias came round from Portsmouth to hear all and about it, there was an end of that. He brought with him a buxom, black-eyed, Devon woman, who very soon proved in equivocal fashion that she had a hold on Copestake's shirt-tails that forbade the thought of escape.

'No, Ozias don't do any more privateering,' she declared to an admiring throng in the Keppel Head. 'Nor no such ungodly work! He don't step across the quay without his wedded wife, nor go aboard so much as a cockboat. He's converted is Ozias. He sees the error of his ways. He's a man o' peace, and high time too!'

Ozias groaned. 'It's deadly work for sure,' he said. 'Deadly to the soul it is! There's nights I canna sleep for thinking o' the men, poor benighted creatures, cursing and swearing in the jaws of hell. It's a crowning mercy I were not cut off. Though, lads,' he added softly, 'I were always careful — careful.'

'Ay, and you'll be more careful now,' Mrs. Ozias said darkly.

From amid the throng of hairy, sunburnt men, some with kerchiefs about their heads and pig-tails at their necks, on whom the naked lamp, hung from the ceiling, cast a fierce light, a shrill voice issued. 'But to fight the French, missus? I never heard as 'twas anything but lawful!'

With one spacious gesture Mrs. Ozias cleared a space before her. She set her arms akimbo, and if no one else trembled Ozias did. 'Now who be you?' she asked. 'Let me see you, little man!' And as the crowd fell back and disclosed the unfortunate Fewster, who had piped up, fancying himself safe in obscurity, 'Let me see you!' the terrible woman continued. 'And how much fighting o' the French ha' you done? But I see. You be one o' them random reckless neck-or-nothing fire-eaters as cursed at the guns while Ozias was in his sins! A bloody-minded limb of Satan never content but with a linstock in your hands! A' breathing fire and slaughter! It's written on you plain what you be, my man! One o' those as set Ozias astray you be!'

Now no one in all Beremouth looked less like a desperado than Joe; a rag of a man, who, as everybody knew, had never been out of sight of land in his life. So the room rocked with Homeric laughter. But Joe, whether drunk or sober, was of the vainest, and he did not see the joke. Stung by the sarcasm, he broke into 'language,' cursing his limbs and all that was his if he wasn't as ready to fight the French as another! 'I'd go to-morrow,' he raved, 'and I will go, sink me if I don't! You're a set of fools! Fools and gabies!'

'Well, you'd best go,' Mrs. Ozias retorted, contemptuous in her strength. 'But you don't 'list Ozias in your crew, my little bantam cock — crow as loud as you like!'

The room rocked anew at the notion of Joe's crew. One clapped another on the back and swore he would sign on. 'But he's greater with a quart pot than a linstock, is Joe!' cried a stentorian voice.

'Oh, lord, I do see Joe 'mid smoke and slaughter!' hic-coughed a man next him, and smacked Joe on the back till he reeled.

Assailed on all sides Joe spattered the crowd with wild words, crying that he'd show them, he'd go, he'd fight the French as well as another! But his weak passion and his

oaths only provoked fresh diversion. Even those who every day drank at Joe's cost laughed with the loudest.

He broke away at last, almost weeping with rage, and made for the door. But before he passed it he planted a dart that rankled. 'Any way, if I took a Frenchman I'd not sink her in harbour!' he shouted. 'And how many of you shirkers owe your lives to me! Asleep and drunk you were, and the water washing you! And I saved you, you swabs, you lubbers, you thickheads!'

Perhaps it was well for him that the door closed on his last word. 'Well,' Ozias said, fairly mazed at finding himself wounded by so puny an opponent, 'he be a scorpion! Sure-lie the poison of asps is under his lips!'

However, Joe gone, the merriment died down. Some one raised the question of the skipper, and, assured that Ozias was not the man, they debated it. Those who knew least leaned to Barney Toll, who was not present; they could think of no one else. But the wiser, and Ozias with them, shook their heads; they knew Barney's limitations, and that, stout seaman as he was, a land-fall and a faculty of shooting the sun were not within them. 'He be at Budgen's now,' Ozias commented. 'But he knows no more than we do, does Barney.'

'Well, I'd want to know,' said one with deliberation, 'fore I slung my hammock.'

'Ay, ay.'

'And 'taint every one I'd go with, lads. The skipper's every man's meat.'

'Or poison, Zekiel! Or poison! You're right. Sure, us'll have a word to say to he.'

A strong feeling ran that way; men shook their heads. One suggested that those concerned should march to Budgen's in a body and have it out with him. ' 'Twon't do to sail with a pig in a poke! No, indeed,' said Ezekiel, something puffed up. 'If 'twere Ozias, now ——'

'Ay, my lad,' Mrs. Ozias said, 'but it ain't Ozias, and you

may swear to it and not choke yourself ! None o' that, d'ye hear ?'

Zekiel collapsed, and no one seemed to be particularly eager to beard Budgen. Then the door opened and Barney came in, and was hailed with loud cries. He was the man to tackle Budgen, he was the lad ! They put it to him, one speaking before another.

Barney set down the pot that had been thrust into his grasp, and wiped his mouth with a powder-blackened hand. 'Another pot !' he said coolly, and not until he held it would he speak. Then, 'No use to go to Budgen,' he said. 'You'll soon know what you want to know. The old man's told me not an hour ago, and not afore 'twas time, by Jehoshaphat.'

'Then who is it, Barney ?' They leaned forward, eager to learn. But Barney, feeling the greatness of the moment, was in no haste to speak. At last, 'Well, 'tis the Lieutenant,' he said.

'Bligh !'

'Ay, it be young Bligh.'

No one spoke. Devon men are cautious and think slowly. They are slow if sure, and one and all they looked to Ozias. 'Well,' he said at last, his eyes on the drink he held in his hand, 'I think 'twill do. I think 'twill do. What do you say, Barney ?'

'I think as you do, Ozias,' Barney replied solemnly, with a ruminating eye on his liquor. 'Not as I'm wedded to him, nor saying there mightn't be better — such as you, Cap'en. But then again I'm thinking there might be worse.'

A dissentient yet a doubtful voice put in a word. 'I'm not liking these silk-stockin' gentlemen, if you ask me,' it said.

A murmur showed that the speaker had his supporters — rash men. But Ozias shook his head. 'There's silk stockings and there's silk stockings,' he said sagely. 'As Barney knows well. And some runs and reeves and some don't — same as woollen. But I'm thinking if 'tis to be a Beremouth man,

as well him as another. That's my 'pinion. I don't know,' he added magnanimously, 'as Budgen could ha' done better.' 'If he don't use his eppilets over us !'

'There you're wrong, my lad,' Ozias said sharply. 'Tight hand, safe hand. Fo'c'sle orders, it's good sea lore, spells raffle atop and a white lee shore ! And you mind it, Zekiel. No, I'm thinking he'll do. He'll give you your bellyful of fighting, and what's lost 'twon't be for lack of a look-out !' But with that, unregenerate memory captured Ozias's thoughts and his eyes began to sparkle. 'D'you mind, Barney,' he continued, 'that time, 'twas off Peniche with the Berlings abeam and a sea, when we sighted ——' But at that point his gaze met his wedded wife's, the sparkle died out of his eyes and Ozias groaned. 'To be sure, 'twas sinful work,' he said meekly, 'sinful work as I should know, and be thankful as I was not cut off in my sins.'

'You're right there,' said Mrs. Ozias briskly. 'But you needn't fear no more, Ozias. I'll see as you're no backslider.'

'No, Ozias,' said a tactless voice — needless to say the speaker was near the door. 'You'll never ship along o' them tubs no more ! The missus will see to that, Ozias !'

CHAPTER XXII

AUGUSTA for the first time in her experience was inclined to criticise her father. She had cast in her lot with him, she had separated herself from her sister, she had been guided in all things by his wishes. And though she had not felt as keenly as he had the importance of removing the Blighs to a distance, of the principle which underlay his action — that the good should be rewarded and the naughty suffer — she had thoroughly approved. But of late she had come to think his methods lacking in finesse, and the tactless manner in which he had dealt with Sir Albery — and offended him — had surprised and dismayed her.

Nor was that the only thing that shook her faith in him. She could not but remark that he had become in these days unlike himself. He had grown moody and irritable, and more than once he had turned on her — his faithful and dutiful daughter — and without cause had rent her.

Still Augusta's temper was equable and her principles were fixed, and though her faith in her leader was shaken she was not as yet prepared to abjure him. When Charlotte therefore came in one morning about this time and made a certain request, she was firm. No, she could not, she said. Whatever her own wishes, as long as her father — she owed a duty to him. The rest, Charlotte had heard before. She became personal, and left in a huff.

But when she was gone and the thing done, Augusta did not feel quite so sure of the wisdom of her answer. That her father would have directed her to reply as she had re-

plied she hardly doubted; but that was not all, she reflected. He was not always wise, or he would not have dealt with Sir Alberty as he had. The longer indeed Augusta dwelt on the matter the more her mind misgave her.

If the windows of the drawing-room had looked on the churchyard instead of on the sea, she would have felt her doubts as good as justified. But the outlook told her nothing; she had no warning vision of the pair who, meeting as if by arrangement, stood long in conference at the farther end of the churchyard wall. As a fact, no arrangement to meet had been made, but a common object had brought the two thither and the meeting surprised neither.

'And she won't go to the Cottage?' Wyke tapped the wall impatiently as he spoke.

'No! I said all that I could, but she is more Augusta than ever! I declare,' Charlotte continued viciously, 'I could beat her!'

He smiled. 'I don't think that that would do much good.'

'It would do me good! Not that I ought to abuse her, I suppose,' Charlotte continued, with a hurried glance at her companion. 'No doubt she thinks it right or she wouldn't do it.'

'I suppose so. But you will go, Miss Bicester?'

'Of course, I shall go, the moment Bligh leaves her. Oh, I do think life is hard!' Charlotte continued. 'That child left like this! He ought not to go! He ought not to go!' she repeated with passion.

'I am far from sure of that,' Wyke replied. 'Indeed, I think I am of their opinion. He has so much to gain by going.'

'And she everything to lose!'

'But something to gain, too,' he said soberly. 'At any rate she thinks so. And, after all, six weeks ——'

'Six eternities!' Charlotte exclaimed. 'Forty-two days, and every day a terror, every hour one long listening, watching, waiting! Every step that comes, the step of one who

brings bad news ! Think of it, when a woman loves ! But men don't think,' Charlotte said, a sting in her tone. 'They don't think. They don't understand !'

Wyke looked at her curiously. 'Yet you understand !' he said.

She coloured to her brow. For a moment she seemed to be so confused that she could not speak, and when she spoke her reply was brusque. 'Well, I'm a woman as much as another — though you may not think it,' she said.

'My dear Miss Bicester !' he protested, surprised by her tone, 'I did not mean to offend you. I only wondered ——'

'You didn't mean ——' she took him up hurriedly. 'Of course not. Of course you didn't. But you see I'm — I'm so savage on Peggy's account I must fly out at someone. She has so few friends, poor girl !'

'And you are so good a friend !'

She looked away, some of the colour still in her face. 'Well, it is all that I can be,' she said bluntly, 'to any one ! A friend. So I try to be a good one. Anyway, Sir Albery, you may count on me. I will go to her as soon as he leaves her. But, good gracious, talk of the devil, here the man comes !'

He did, and alone for a wonder; striding towards them with hurried steps, plucked for a brief moment from the turmoil and frenzy of the Cove — the Cove, where watching crowds fringed the beach, and boats splashed ceaselessly 'twixt brig and shore, and sailors stamped and winches squealed, and confusion reigned, with Barney's curses driving through it like a plough ! Bligh came from all this and from pressing cares and labours — respited, too, for just this moment, from the leave-taking that weighed his spirits down like lead, that one instant he would fain have had behind him and over, and that the next was the atom of time the most precious, the most poignant, the dearest; the moment upon which he must look back with heart-break through many a lonely watch ! Since day-break he had not seen Peggy. He had

had no word with her. He had been hailed this way and that, called here and summoned there; he had stowed, tallied, checked, enforced orders, slung tipsy Jacks below, been merged in a hundred tasks. But never had he forgotten the parting to come; and many times with his eyes busy and his brain absorbed he had raised eyes and mind to the white walls and the green shutters, where she waited for him, waited for that last moment, that last embrace, that last clinging of the arms that, it might be, might never hold him again !

At this moment he should have been with her. But he had imagined a last service he could do for her. The notion had come late, when every minute was of value, and he had hurried on his errand, hoping not to be missed. As he approached the two who stood beside the wall, they saw that the man was out of breath, dusty, weary, and, as it seemed, moved. He attempted no preface. 'I heard you were here,' he said. And then, his eyes travelling in a last doubt from the one to the other, he hesitated.

'If I can do anything for you ?' Wyke said, wondering. The man's presence at this stage was odd.

'Everything that matters you can,' Bligh replied. He was quite unlike himself. 'Miss Bicester, you will care for her, I know ! And do for her what you can ? I know you will. God bless you for it !'

'You may trust me, Mr. Bligh,' she said warmly, her grievance against him forgotten. 'We wish you the best of luck and a quick return !'

'And you ?' He turned to Sir Alberty. 'If the worst comes to the worst she will need a friend; she will need everything — everything, God knows ! You will not desert her ? You will stand by her ?'

It seemed to Charlotte an appeal that could be answered in one way only, and she was surprised when Wyke hesitated. He looked from Bligh to her and from her to Bligh, and she could see that he was moved. But there was more than emo-

tion, there was doubt in his tone when he spoke. 'I — I am not sure,' he said. 'I am not sure that you are wise, Mr. Bligh.' His face was troubled.

But Bligh had no doubt. 'Yes,' he said, 'I am sure. I know you, and I trust her to you — and my child. You did not fail her before and you will not fail her now.'

'God forbid !' the other replied — and his heart went with the words. 'But you don't know what you ask ! There are others to be considered, and ——'

Charlotte cut him short. 'He will do it !' she said. The tears were running down her face. 'He will do it. You may trust him ! You may go without fear, Mr. Bligh. And go, go to her now. She will be waiting.'

'God bless you !' he said, his voice unsteady. He wrung her hand.

He turned, and went from them as abruptly as he had come. Until he plunged into the path leading down to the Cove and his figure was lost to sight neither spoke. Then, 'I did not know what to say,' Sir Albery muttered. 'It — it was a hard thing to promise. I don't know if it was right.'

Charlotte wiped her eyes. 'I know very well,' she said. 'I did you more justice than you — you wished to do yourself. That was all. And I am glad I did it.'

'I doubt,' he said. 'You see, one has to consider what other people will say and — and think.'

'Fiddle-de-dee !' Charlotte cried, impatiently cutting him short. 'If you had not promised to do it, you would have done it. You would have had to do it.'

'Why ?' he asked. 'Why should I ?'

'Because you are you — and you love her,' Charlotte said bluntly. And seeing him about to interrupt her afresh, 'She's married ? Of course she is married,' she continued flippantly, 'but what difference does that make — if he does not come back ! Oh, do let us have an end of nonsense,' she added pettishly, seeing that he was still inclined to argue

with her. 'What we have to do now is to take care of her and not bother about the future, or go into hysterics about something that may never happen. I will give him half an hour and then I will go to her.'

'Poor girl! Poor girl!' he said. Then it was plain that his thoughts travelled from the comforted to the comforter, for 'You are braver than I am!' he said. 'I would not go on your errand, my dear, for a thousand pounds.'

She turned her shoulder on him that the colour that flooded her face might be hidden. 'Yes, you would,' she said, 'if it were your business. I know you better than you know yourself.'

They parted on that and did not meet again that day. An hour later Wyke found himself in the Cove. Standing a little apart from the crowd and leaning on his cane he watched with a sombre face the scene of confusion that had for its centre now the thronged and noisy beach, and now the brig that like some stately swan encircled by her fussy young ones lay a half-mile out. Not he alone but many a foreboding eye noticed that the sunshine of a spring morning had given place to clouds, beneath which, as under a canopy, the clear air disclosed, sharp-cut against the offing, every line of gear and curve of hull. Across the leaden, faintly shining sea that, except where a rare breath ruffled it, was as smooth as a steel floor, boats sculled by men standing on their feet went heavily to and fro, hailing one another as they passed. The voices of those on deck came faintly to the ear or sank merged in the half-hysterical cheers that sped an adventurer on his way, or the angry shout of some boatswain or petty officer come ashore to shepherd the belated. Beneath these harsher sounds the murmur of the watching crowds, the plash of oars, the monotonous fall of the wavelets as they lapped the shore, furnished an accompaniment in tune with the sullen sky and the suspense that Wyke shared with many who were more nearly concerned.

Averting his eyes for a moment from the sea, he became

aware of the Rector standing not far off and a little apart, watching the scene. With Bligh's parting words still in his mind, Wyke felt no desire for the other's company, and he made no movement towards him. But, by and by, he found Portnal at his elbow, and he had no choice but to greet him. He was struck by the man's bearing. He looked disturbed and unlike himself.

The Rector did not reply to his greeting, but asked if he knew where Budgen was. 'I don't see him,' he added.

'Budgen?' Wyke turned and passed the crowd under review. 'No, I don't see him. He must be on board.'

'I didn't see him go off,' the Rector rejoined with a frown. He seemed to be troubled by the man's absence — to attach some special importance to it. Wyke's eyes searched the crowd afresh.

'Do you want him?' he asked.

'No, I don't want him.'

'Well, he is sure to be here, though I don't see him. Ten to one he's on board. He has too much at stake not to be here.'

'I hope he has,' the Rector said, his tone strange.

Wyke did not understand. He let the words pass. 'You may be sure that he is here — somewhere,' he said. 'He will be on board and will come off with the last boat. You are anxious, Rector?' he added, surprised by the other's moody face, for he judged Portnal to be a man as little likely to feel acutely as to betray his feelings.

The Rector's answer left no doubt in his mind. 'I am,' he said, 'very anxious.' And his tone bore him out.

Wyke wondered whether it was the money that he had at stake that troubled the man — or his daughter. He decided that it was the former, and he shrugged his shoulders. 'After all, it is only the fortune of war,' he remarked. 'And she is well found and well manned and, I think, well commanded. I suppose half a dozen vessels sail every day on her errand, and five out of six come back safely.'

To Wyke's surprise the Rector shook his head. And 'D—n the man,' Wyke thought. 'If he is thinking of his daughter he should have thought before! Serve him right! If he feels that way, why doesn't he make it up!' And he was not sorry when Portnal, his hands clasped behind him, moved restlessly away. He caught a glimpse of his face as he went, and again he was struck by its gloom.

His attention was recalled to what was passing by a cheer, shrill and puny, that seemed to be beaten down by the grey canopy overhead, and to be lost in the vastness of air and sea. The jib and fore-sails were going up, they were getting the brig's head to seaward. A stream of tiny figures poured over the side, slid down into the boats, pushed off, and lay by, waving oars. The *Lively Peggy*, like a sentient thing awaking to life, bowed to the light breeze, forged gently ahead, then, as sail after sail ran up on fore and main until one tall pyramid of canvas showed half-hidden by the other, she began to move gently and majestically towards the point of the bluff. The flag dipped, the Blue Peter dropped, a gun was fired — last salute to the lessening land — the crowd raised a feeble shout, and the cruise of the *Lively Peggy* had begun. All eyes followed her and clung to her. Somewhere in the press a woman broke into weeping.

Not all eyes. For as if the report of the gun had wheeled him about Wyke turned and gazed at the tiny green shutters and the thatched roof on the cliff-side above him. What a pang that sound must have inflicted on that tender heart! With what dumb prayers, what anguished eyes must the stricken creature whom that roof sheltered be following the white pyramids, the pigmy hull that grew ever smaller and smaller, that the eastward bluff already threatened to obscure! What a loneliness of desolation must already be closing in, be crushing the heart that beat there! He pictured the two women clasped in one another's arms, and the 'God help her!' that broke from him was followed in a breath by a 'God bless her! She is a noble creature!' that had an-

other direction yet was hardly less fervently uttered. The comforted and the comforter ! Wyke did not know to which of the two whom that humble roof covered his heart went out more warmly ; whether pity or gratitude moved him more deeply.

He looked round, arrested. A laugh, rude and discordant, had jarred upon his thoughts. The crowd was beginning to break away and to stream up the path towards the town, and two or three men had halted near him. They were discussing something that seemed to afford them vast amusement. 'I tell you, it is so !' one swore, with a chuckle. 'I saw him with my own eyes, man, sneaking in the fo'c'sle ! And I'll swear he never came off ! If he did, where is he ?'

'I b'lieve you're right, Elijah,' one of the others agreed. 'Bli' me if I don't ! And if so it be, 'twill be a pill for the old man, sink me if it won't ! A pill as'll work him proper ! Proper it will !'

'Well, I'd never ha' thought it of him !' a third exclaimed. 'I never give Joe so much spunk as to do it ! But I mind when he were that riled that night at the Keppel he said a word like it ! I thought 'twas only wind, for he's a windy soul when in liquor. But seemin'ly he's been as good as his word. Lord, I'd like to see the old man's face when he hears it !'

' 'Twill work him fine ! But if he'd been there, as 'twas right he should be —— '

'Budgen ?' There was a new note in the speaker's tone. 'Ay, by gum. Where the devil is he ? Where is he, man ? I never see him first to last.'

'He warn't there, and reason good ! Ill in his stomach, and in his bed, I'm told. But if you ask me, put out o' something, God knows what ! He's easy crossed, th' old skin-flint, and maybe his new skipper cut athwart him.'

'But not to see his own boat go out ! It's past believing !' another cried in admiration.

'You're right, lad. But he's a hard block is the old man.

Hard as his own timber, and cross-grained as never was, take him the wrong way ! But Jehoshaphat ! I'd stand a pot all round to see his face when 'tis told to him that Joe's gone !'

' 'Twould be worth it, Elijah ! I dunno as I wouldn't give all your score behind the door to see it ! And cheap !' Which raised a laugh, and the men moved on.

Wyke, too, moved away, wondering a little. It was certainly odd that Budgen had not been there. He began to understand the Rector's astonishment. Then, partly to avoid the chattering crowd, partly because he had no heart to pass before the green shutters, he cut across the stream of people, and slowly and thoughtfully took the long road back to the town.

CHAPTER XXIII

DR. PORTNAL was not a bad man, but supremacy in a small sphere had hardened his fibres, narrowed his vision, had made of him a petty despot. Nevertheless, at bottom and under all, the man had a heart; and in the days that followed the departure of the brig his heart was giving him trouble. Until lately it was in his pride and his self-esteem that he had suffered, and in these only. The scandal that his girl had caused, and the presence of that scandal ever before his eyes, had wounded him to the quick, and he had allowed the wound to rankle and to poison his life. It had made him, he had fancied, as unhappy as a man could be and still hold up his head.

But now that the *Lively Peggy* was gone, and gone beyond recall, the Rector was discovering that a man might suffer worse things than these. He was discovering that he had not plumbed the depths, nor nearly plumbed the depths; and that beside an uneasy conscience, to say nothing of an anxious heart, wounded vanity was a light evil. An uneasy conscience! It was that, late awakened, that plagued him now, do what he would, and by reviving in some strange way his affection for, and his sense of duty to, his daughter, held up before him a dozen times a day a shadow of judgment to come.

For on the eve of the departure of the *Lively Peggy* the knowledge that his daughter was expecting a child had for the first time reached him. That the knowledge should touch him, should soften him, was natural. As natural was it that it should bring home to him certain risks, and that he

should remember with misgiving her need at such a time of friends, of comfort, of ease, of her husband. A first child ! And his daughter ! But with pride to help him he could have borne this and the doubts it entailed very well ; he could have stood firm against it. Probably he would have told himself that if things went wrong he would be unhappy, a man upon whom circumstances bore hardly. But he would have blamed circumstances rather than himself.

He did try, even as things were, to maintain that that was the position. He told himself several times, thrusting another and worse thought from him, that that was all, that his conscience was clear, and that if aught went wrong he was guiltless. He strove hard to believe this, and to be sure of it ; and in the main he did believe it. Yet there was always a doubt ; at the very best there was a doubt. He could not be sure ! Or rather he was sure ; sure that in consenting to Budgen's suggestion that Bligh should take the command, he had not had any evil purpose, any covert hope that if the man went he would not return. And most certainly — of this he was sure — he had not connected Budgen's statement that he had insured the vessel with the question before him. No ! The suspicion that had crossed his mind had been so nebulous, so fleeting, so faint, nay, so monstrous, that it was even more monstrous to imagine that he had let it move him. He had put the absurd thought aside as soon as conceived, and it was preposterous to imagine that he had been affected by it.

For on what had the suspicion, slight and passing as it was, rested ? On nothing more than a shade of manner, a turn of the eye, a shifty look ! And to suggest that a thing supported by no more than a shadow on a man's face had moved him to consent to a thing so wicked as the knowingly sending a fellow creature to his death — surely it was a charge out of all reason, and the nightmare of a sick mind !

True, he had not then heard of his daughter's condition. He had not recognised that a shock might kill her, he had

not known the circumstances, or he would not have agreed to the appointment — though he told himself that his consent had been of the most innocent. Innocent? Certainly it had been innocent — yet again and for the hundredth time he fell painfully, fearfully to searching his memory; to recalling the minutiae of the interview with Budgen, his words, looks, thoughts — to setting his mind on the rack, to tormenting himself. If he could be sure, quite sure! It all came to that.

And he could not be quite sure. He could not be certain that the thought had not flashed through his mind; that he had not for one brief instant seen the advantage it would be to him if the man went and did not come back! He could not be sure that he had not for a moment entertained the thought that it was the man's own business if aught happened to him; and Budgen's crime if there were foul play. He could not, and a dozen times a day he heard the abhorrent whisper accusing him, indicting him, bidding him note that if the worst happened he might have upon his soul the death of his daughter, the daughter whom he now knew that he loved! Again and again he closed his mind to the fancy; but it haunted him. He could not ignore it, he could not shut it out though it was absurd. It came between him and his curate when they talked, it loomed a shadow at his dinner-table, it brought the sweat to his brow as he lay sleepless, it shook his hand when he shaved. It was absurd, ridiculous, monstrous — it was baseless. But it persisted. He thrust it from him; it returned to plague him.

Among other effects it inspired him with a dumb hatred of Budgen — the tempter, if temptation there had been. He had never liked the man. He had used him and despised him. But now he hated him, tracing back to his absence at the moment of the brig's departure the first conscious pang that had troubled his mind. It was that absence, strange and ominous, that had roused his fears and forced him to

question himself, forced him to search his memory, and to recognise that monstrous as was the thing that he had for a brief instant suspected, it was not actually impossible.

For he knew that through the smugglers, who went to and fro by night, communication with the other side was frequent. He knew that Budgen had dealings with them, and that on occasion he had taken up their goods at sea and brought them in. He knew that, given a traitor, the thing was feasible and was done, though very rarely.

A monstrous and incredible crime ! But he had heard of such things, the pot-house gossip of the ports whispered of them, and believed in them. True, it was seldom that the crime would pay. The value of a cruising ship and its chances exceeded the sum for which it was insured. But with peace in sight — and peace was probable — a desperate and embarrassed man might be tempted. He might see his way to secure the war-value and prefer a guilty solvency to the risks of a last cruise.

For some days the Rector bore with his thoughts in silence, though the temptation to approach the boat-builder, and try whether the sight of the man at work in his everyday surroundings would not dispel his fancies, was ever with him. He was doubtful of his own temper; possibly too, he feared to put all to the test. Then a certain fact came to his knowledge, and primed with it and grimly minded to use it, he went down to the Cove.

The sun was low as he descended the road, and in comparison with the stir and bustle which had enlivened it for many days the Cove was deserted. Work had ceased, and it was hard to believe that the town lay near. The tide was at flood, and a lonely sea broke sullenly on the ridge of shingle, its measured fall and the rattle of the pebbles drawn down by the ebbing waves supplying a bass to the shrill wailing of gulls. No human figure moved on the wide beach, and the Rector was turning in the direction of Budgen's house when he remembered that the man might be in the

moulding-loft. His tread as he crossed the pebbles was not light, but it fell on deaf ears. When he looked into the shed and discovered Budgen the man did not move.

He was gazing, sunk in thought, on the plan of the *Peggy* that figured in outline on the side of the loft. He did not turn or stir, but the Rector, pausing a moment in surprise, heard a sound burst from the man's breast. It was half a sigh and half a groan — or it might have been a stifled oath. Whatever it was, it did not bespeak depression more eloquently than Budgen's attitude; he might have been looking on the corpse of his mother. And he continued to stand and to gaze, until the Rector touched him on the shoulder. Then he turned sharply, and to the Rector's astonishment there were tears on his rugged cheeks.

He turned not only sharply but savagely; only by an effort it seemed did he withhold himself from striking the other. His hand was raised to the Rector's breast, when with an oath he withdrew it, and passed it across his face. 'What the hell do you want?' he exclaimed, forgetting himself in his surprise. His eyes were wild.

'Steady, man, steady!' the Rector said. 'You forget yourself.'

'But is no place a man's own, but you come creeping, creeping, creeping, and ——'

'I made noise enough, Budgen, if you had had ears to hear,' the Rector said sternly. 'What in the world is the matter with you, man? One might suppose you were committing a crime!'

'I thought I was alone,' Budgen muttered sullenly, his eyes falling. 'What is your errand?'

'An unwelcome one, I am afraid. Where is your nephew, Budgen?'

'My nevy?' The man raised his voice, he spoke with temper. 'In the Keppel Head, sotting, ten to one! Why do you ask? It's what he'll be doing most days.'

'And what you have supported him in doing,' the Rector

rejoined severely. He had suffered, and he was not sorry that it was in his power to make this man suffer. 'But I think you are mistaken. He is not in the Keppel Head, Budgen. I am told—it's common talk—that he is at sea.'

Budgen laughed sourly. He had got himself in hand again. 'At sea!' he repeated. 'Joe? I'd like to see him, the lazy swab! Not in a hundred years, I'll go bail!' He spat on the ground in his contempt. 'Who's told you that lie, asking your pardon?'

'I don't think it is a lie,' the Rector said quietly. He was watching his man.

'Well, you may take your davy, it is,' Budgen retorted. 'He's not the spunk. What should he be at sea for—Joe? He's too well off here, confound him! See him go to sea! As if I wouldn't know! Eh? Wouldn't I know if he was?'

'I can't say. But it is true. I have it from one who saw him go.'

For the first time the man was shaken. 'Saw him go?' he repeated—and now there was a grain of doubt in his voice. 'Saw him go? Where, I'd like to know, the swab? To Plymouth in the market-boat? And why not? It's no odds to me, sink him, whether he drinks i' Plymouth or here.'

'No,' the Rector replied. 'He's gone farther than that, Budgen. And I wonder that you have not heard. He sailed on the *Lively Peggy* last Thursday.'

Budgen's face swelled. He glared at the Rector. 'Sailed! Sailed!' he ejaculated, struggling for utterance and unable to get the words out. At last, 'On the *Peggy*! On the *Peggy* a-Thursday? It's a lie! It's an infernal lie!' he repeated violently. 'Why he couldn't! He couldn't! He wasn't signed on.'

'He stowed away, I'm told.'

'Stowed away?' Budgen repeated the phrase mechanically,

but his voice dropped to a whisper. And with a sinking of the heart the other saw the change that he had come to see, and had feared to see. Budgen's face, a moment before crimson with rage, turned to an unhealthy sallow; the hand that he raised to hide his quivering lips shook, his form seemed to sink into itself. 'It's — it's not — not possible,' he said weakly. 'They're — it's their joke.' He tried to smile, but the sweat stood in great beads on his forehead. 'They will ha' their joke — to be sure !'

The Rector was watching him with ruthless eyes, and he asked for no further evidence. He had judged the man and he had no pity to spare for him; for one whose monstrous, whose most wicked act he now more than suspected. Pity ? He needed all his pity for himself. 'I am afraid it is no joke, Budgen,' he said sternly. 'It may have been kept from you, but it is no secret that he sailed.'

For a few seconds Budgen stood, a stricken man. Only his lips moved, and they without a sound. Then he turned, and as he turned he reeled. The Rector thought that he was about to fall, struck down by the news, and he stepped forward. But Budgen straightened himself. With his back still turned he muttered a word or two, ill-heard. 'I'm — I'm ill, I ——' With unsteady steps he staggered from the shed, turned the corner, disappeared.

Surprised by the suddenness of the man's retreat, the Rector paused where he stood. Then with a sinking heart, he stepped out into the open, and followed the other with his eyes. He watched him, and his heart sank lower. For Budgen, pressing the pace, his head bent, made from time to time wild gestures that the watcher was at no loss to interpret. He read in them the horror of a man caught in his own trap, crushed by his own invention, sensible too late of the avenging hand of Providence — that out of a man's own sin could weave his punishment !

'My God !' the Rector cried, and felt and owned in that moment of vision the horror of complicity. On him, too,

the bolt might fall, and his sin, if he had indeed sinned, might find him out ! And only too well he knew where that bolt might fall, how and through whom his sin might work out his punishment. He did indeed still cry in his heart that he was innocent, that he had not known, that he had not imagined ! But in the same breath he uttered a prayer for mercy. That he might be spared — that he might be spared that ! But he feared.

He stood awhile as one in a maze, then he crossed the strand, the horror still upon him. Mechanically he climbed the steep path that he had climbed so often in his pride and strength. Stripped of both now, he had but the one instinct, to hide himself, to be alone; and he had reached the churchyard without knowing how he came thither before he collected his thoughts and regained a measure of composure. There he took breath, passed his handkerchief across his brow, and strove to throw off the obsession that had gripped him. But he was a scared man, a man who had passed through the fire and felt the scorching. He removed his hat and bared his head to the breeze, and gradually calmness returned to him. He told himself, with a shudder, that his nerves were not what they had been, that he was growing old. He muttered that he had suffered himself to be upset, to be alarmed by — by shadows. He must control himself. He must not give way to — to exaggeration.

But the fact remained, and he was conscious of it and shuddered at it. As he dwelt on it, he closed his eyes in pain. The fact remained, and what was he to do about it ? Could he do anything to alter it ? He could prove nothing, and if he spoke it would avail nothing. He had no evidence, no man would believe him; and if the *Lively Peggy* and her crew were indeed betrayed they were lost already.

And after all it might not be so. He had been swayed by the man's demeanour, and by that alone. Now he came to think of it more soberly, the risk to Fewster might account for all — and Budgen might be innocent. The news was

ill news, even if the boat-builder's hands were clean and his conscience clear; ill news, and he might well be overwhelmed by it. Budgen had shown over and over again that he placed an abnormal value on Fewster's life, the life upon which his lease of the Cove depended.

The Rector wiped his brow again, and this time his hand was steady. He had frightened himself for nothing. It must be so. With his hat in his hand and his face turned seaward he fanned his heated brow. He had had an evil dream, and he had suffered it to master him. A sigh relieved his over-charged heart, and he put on his hat. He turned his face towards the Rectory. And then he saw coming across the churchyard, limping in the direction of the path of the Cove, the frail but upright form of the old Captain.

CHAPTER XXIV

THE sight affected him strangely. The composure that he had so newly recovered fell from him, the old terror, or much of it, returned. It did more, it drove him to action, thrusting him forward as if an impulse from without had moved him. An hour earlier he would have gone a hundred yards about to avoid the man. Now he no longer saw in him an emblem and a reminder of disgrace, but a possible help in trouble, and he bore down upon him without at the moment knowing what he would say.

The Captain saw him coming and tried to escape. But his feebleness and his limping gait were no match for the other's hale strength, and as he reached the head of the path the Rector overtook him.

'A word with you !' Portnal said. He did not mean to be harsh, but in the Captain's terrified ears his voice sounded doom, and the old man cringed before him, remembering the last occasion on which they had spoken. He waited with a scared face to learn the great man's pleasure. 'Have you heard from your son ?' the Rector asked.

'From my son ?' the old man bleated.

'Yes, man, yes ! Have you heard from him — since he sailed ?'

The Captain was dumbfounded. He shook his head, wondering in what new way they had offended, what fresh transgression this imported. He glanced furtively at the other's massive face. He saw that he was agitated and he supposed him to be angry.

'You might have,' the Rector insisted, pressing the point. 'He might have spoken an inward ship ?'

At this Bligh perceived a change in the other's attitude, and he gathered his wits. 'We have not, sir,' he muttered. 'We do not expect to have news yet !'

At another time the Rector would have winced at that word 'we.' But he was far from thinking of that now. 'Listen to me,' he said earnestly, 'and mark, sir, if you please, and carefully, what I say. My daughter is expecting a child, I hear ?'

The Captain, fancying that this was the new offence, murmured humbly that it was so — he believed.

'When ?'

'In a month, I am told, sir.'

'Then listen to me !' The Rector, in his anxiety to bring his words home to the old man, laid his hand on his shoulder, and shook him as he had shaken him once before, though more gently. 'Listen, if you please, sir, and mark what I say. Bad news may come — God forbid, but it may. It is useless to deny it or to close your eyes to it. If it come — keep it from her ! Do you hear ? Keep it from her !' he repeated with desperate earnestness. 'Watch her night and day if it be necessary, and see that no one comes to her to tell her. If you value her life and the child's life, see to it. See to it, sir ! Do you understand ? Now, do you understand ?'

Old Bligh's eyes filled with tears. He could not speak, but he nodded, nodded vehemently. None the less was he confounded. So this man had bowels like another ! He had affections, was human ! Parted from his daughter by his own act, he still thought for her. It was a thing that the Captain had not suspected. He had thought the man hard as iron, unfeeling as granite ! He could only nod, and did nod, but in his surprise he was speechless.

The Rector was not satisfied. The old man seemed to him half-imbecile. 'Do you understand ?' he insisted. 'Speak, man ! Let there be no mistake about this.'

The Captain found his voice. 'God knows I'll do my best,'

he said fervently. 'I will guard her, sir, day and night. You may depend on me. You may depend on me. But God forbid,' and his old face broke up and worked piteously. 'My son! My son!'

'Amen! Amen!' the Rector said solemnly. 'We will hope and pray that all may be well. But we must also use the means we have. In a month? I am afraid that if the worst happen it will happen long before that. With the wind as it is, she should be near her cruising ground by now. You know where that is?'

Old Bligh shook his head. 'My son did not tell me. He thought it wiser to tell no one,' he said.

'Right! Quite right! The secret cannot be in too few hands — for all our sakes, God knows.'

So feeling was his tone that the Captain plucked up spirit and ventured greatly. He said a thing that an hour before he would have found it impossible to say. 'Will you not come and see her?' he asked meekly.

Few had caught the Rector more at fault. He was like a fencer touched when he least expected it. For a moment he seemed to be at a loss what to say: it might even have been thought that he wavered. Then 'I will send my daughter,' he said awkwardly. And with a last 'Be careful, sir, I beg! Be careful,' flung over his shoulder, and pressed home by a wave of his gold-headed cane, he turned away. He walked quickly towards the Rectory.

Go and see Peggy? Why not? For his heart was soft towards her. A hundred recollections of her childhood, of her youth, of her laughing eyes and gay prattle, of her clinging arms, her waywardness and her repentance, crowded upon him and moved him. For the first time he viewed in another light the privations that she must be suffering, and that his prejudices multiplied fourfold. He viewed them no longer as a degradation in which he was involved, but as a claim upon his pity. Go and see her? He was willing, but, alas, he owned it with shame, he had not the

courage. He shrank from the scene. The thought of facing her with that on his mind which lay there and would not be shaken off, unnerved him. In the past he had judged her and condemned her, and she had indeed been at fault. Grievously at fault. But now their places were changed. It was her judgment that he feared, her condemnation from which he shrank, even while he pleaded with passion that he was innocent. But was he innocent? 'God knows!' he said. 'God knows!'

He found Augusta seated at her tambour frame, as he had found her a hundred times before. But to-day the placidity that he had so often, though tacitly, commended, the sedate calm that he had so often approved, had the effect of irritating him. She sat there surrounded by the still life of the handsome, spacious room — and she worked and she smiled while her sister — He did not follow out the thought, for even in his irritation he was just, and he owned that her sister had offended while she was perfect. He owned, for he knew it was the fact, that before she had seated herself there she had fulfilled her household duties, arranged all, ordered all, seen that the wheels on which his comfort rested ran smoothly. Nevertheless the thought that he nipped half-conceived put tartness into his tone.

'Augusta,' he said, 'I wish you to go and see your sister.'

Augusta looked at him. It was not in her to be flustered, but for once she let him see that she was surprised, while her incredulous 'Sir?' conveyed and not too subtly a reproach.

He repeated his words. 'I wish you to go and see your sister,' he said, colouring slightly under her gaze. 'She is expecting a child — in a month I am told. I have weighed the matter and I wish you to go to her. In the circumstances it is right that she should have one of her own kin at call — badly as she has behaved.'

'Then you mean to forgive her, sir?' Augusta said. 'I am glad.' She spoke with the submission that became her,

but the faint smile on her lips found a raw place in the Rector's self-esteem and provoked him.

'It is not a question of forgiveness,' he said, 'but of accepting the fact. The husband is absent, and this, while it renders indulgence more easy, makes it also more incumbent. She is alone, without friend or protection, and at such a time, I have decided, Augusta, that it is neither right nor becoming that we should stand aloof.'

To say that Augusta, the perfect daughter, was ruffled would be to say too much. But she was surprised. 'If you had spoken before, sir,' she said with a gentle sigh, 'I should have gone, of course. But I gathered that you did not wish it.'

'I did not,' the Rector replied, accepting the position that she thrust on him. 'That is true, quite true. But I wish it now. I have determined that the time has come ——'

'To forgive her?' Augusta repeated softly.

'At any rate to cease to hold aloof. To give what help we can. I shall be glad if you will see her to-day and learn in what way we can help her.'

Augusta was silent for a time. She took up her needle and paused with her eyes on her work. Apparently she was considering the effect of her last stitches. But at length, 'I am afraid, sir,' she said, 'you must tell me what attitude you wish me to take up. Am I to tell Peggy that she is forgiven? And that the other things that flow from that will follow? That you are prepared to accept Mr. Bligh and to treat him as belonging to the family? Because if I am not to go as far as that, I know Peggy well, and I foresee that my visit will rather widen the breach than close it — if that is what you wish, sir.'

Perfect daughter as she was, she knew when she was annoying, and she was prepared for an irritable reply. But the tone of the reply and her father's agitation when he spoke surprised her.

'Girl! Girl!' he cried, and the apostrophe was so unlike

him, that it startled her. 'Have done !' Or think, think before you speak ! What if your sister do not live ? What if we lose her ? A first child, her husband away, and in peril, and she friendless and alone ! I am' — with a sudden drop in his voice — 'I am unhappy about her ! If aught befall him, if bad news come, and bad news may come at any time, in her condition it may be fatal to her !'

'But that is looking a long way ahead, sir,' Augusta ventured to say.

'Such news may come to-morrow !' he retorted. 'And what shall we feel then ? What shall we say for ourselves ? I am still her father, you are her sister ! And shall we then forgive ourselves, shall we then blame her only ? No, go to her, provide for her, see that she lacks nothing — so far as may be in that poor place ! And God grant that she come through her trial ! When that is over it will be time to talk of forgiveness !'

For almost the first time in her life August felt a touch of contempt for her father. She had no clue to the agitation that shook him, and his sudden *volte-face* seemed to her of the weakest. His fears appeared excessive and far-fetched; she told herself that he was growing old. But if he failed as a father, she would not fail as a daughter, and 'Certainly, if it is your wish, sir, I will go,' she said. 'And I may give her your love ?' She could not quite keep the note of irony out of her tone.

He detected it, but he replied to it in his own way. 'My love and my blessing !' he said. But having said it, whether he read the amazement in Augusta's eyes or no, he turned and went hurriedly from the room.

Yet, safe in his study, he was thankful that he had acted. He was thankful that he had spoken. He felt as one at sea in a leaky vessel who desperately and painfully strengthens every plank that threatens to give way, caulks every seam by which fate and the devouring waves may enter. He asked himself if there was anything else that he could

do, any further precaution that he could take. He added up the days that the *Lively Peggy* had been at sea; he calculated the earliest date at which, reaching her cruising ground, she would enter the sphere of danger; he deduced the earliest time at which bad news, if bad news came, might be expected. He strove to comfort himself with the reflection that if a snare awaited her the odds would be overwhelming, and the *Peggy* would have no choice but to surrender — there would be no engagement and no loss of life. And over and over again he told himself that he trembled and sweated without reason; that the chances were in the man's favour, that he at least would survive.

But he reassured himself to no purpose. For at the back of his mind loomed the shadow of a Nemesis, the idea that he could not put from him of an avenging Providence not to be denied. It over-rode reason, it defied probability. And if the worst happened? Then he felt that all his life he would have upon his mind that on which he dared not dwell, though a hundred times he cried with an exceeding bitter cry that he was innocent. Ay, he was innocent — could he only be sure of it! Meantime he foresaw hours and days, weeks it might be, of suspense, through which he must live with that dreadful fear on his conscience.

He had done in his life not a few hard and some harsh things. He had been ruled by convention rather than by sympathy, by justice rather than by charity; his standard had not been higher than the standard of his neighbours. He had seen his own rights clearly, and had taken care that others respected them; and dowered with the good things of this world he had enjoyed them without overmuch thought of others or of his responsibility for them. But he had never wantonly done evil. He had broken no law — save, it might be, the law of love. He had dispossessed no man, shifted no landmark. The suspicion that he had done so now, that thoughtlessly, blinded by ill-will, he had involved himself in a dreadful thing and become the participator in a possible

crime, haunted him like a nightmare from which he could not awake !

While he suffered Augusta wondered. And presently she acted. She had no strong objection to her father's shift, sudden as it was, and though it lowered him in her eyes. If he chose to turn about and forgive Peggy, he was the person offended and it was his business. But she could not rid herself of the feeling that the step was unfair to her. She had not offended, she had been obedient, she had done her duty and she would still do it. But the one scale, she felt, could not be raised without lowering the other; the erring sister could not be forgiven without lessening the merit of the sinless. Still, she would obey, though she expected to derive no pleasure from her errand, but rather discomfort and embarrassment. The meeting would be awkward, and Peggy might ride the high horse — the girl had been ever queer and unaccountable — while Augusta had a distaste for low life, and a shrinking from the conditions that she expected to encounter. It would be unpleasant to see her own sister so low, and mortifying to rub shoulders with the poverty in which she lived, the shifts to which she had been driven.

But duty was duty, and Augusta prepared herself, and set forth. She winced as she turned in at the wicket-gate, and looked about her with a doubtful eye as she knocked at the door of the cottage.

But she knocked in vain. Peggy was out, and Augusta turned away with a sigh of relief. She ascended the path with a lighter step.

CHAPTER XXV

THE RECTORY, the Cottage and Budgen's were not the only roofs in Beremouth over which a cloud — though for the hopeful a cloud with a golden lining — hung during these days; or beneath which any unusual sound caused hearts to leap and flutter like frightened birds. There were low-browed windows by the water-side that in winter the spray lashed like a whip and the spindrift darkened, whence even as early as this anxious eyes searched the offing night and morning. There were humble dwellings in lane and alley, where on hot days grotesque sea-shells held the door open, in which seamen's almanacks were painfully thumbed by the light of tallow dips, while untravelled minds groped about distant seas, or drank in the talk of old salts, who, called to council, prated of shoals and currents and dealt out outlandish names, the Berlings and the Farallones and the like. Women, old and young, but with the same hungry look in their eyes, flocked to meet the Plymouth boat, if by good hap it brought news; or ran to the wharf if word went round that a yawl from Falmouth had been driven in by weather. On the quay, men, leaning against posts or sitting upon up-turned boats as their forefathers had leant and sat in Armada days, yarned and debated in soft, slow Devon voices, searching the horizon for weather signs, prosing on the set of tides, sailing old voyages, telling old tales.

In all this there was nothing new to Beremouth. So it had been with its forefathers who had sent their seven ships to Sluys — a proud feat never forgotten and often wrangled

over: for picturing the seven as tall three-deckers or frigates at the least, men never ceased to wonder how they had contrived to lie within the little breakwater or got depth of water. Now, as then, women feared and prayed, and old men, hiding their tremors behind gnarled hands, swore that there was no ground for fear. If news was slow and late to come they quoted Christian's gales, or told off the weeks that this or that squadron had spent, beating up from Alexandria to the Straits. So it had always been in Beremouth, and so it was still. Men came back, or they did not come back. Women turned to see a shadow fall on the doorstep, and he was there! Or a darker shadow crossed the threshold and the sea had taken one more, and made of another wife a widow. It was the way that life ran there and in a hundred coastward places, when war added its risks to the perils of shoal and gale.

But on Peggy these things fell with the weight of the new and untried. She had not been wont to lie awake and tremble when the south-wester shook the walls and rattled the casements, or the sullen gun of some passing ship struck a knell in listening ears. She had not learned in the school of patience the long, long lesson of waiting. Nor had she, like some, been a wife so many years as to be weary of her man, indifferent, care-free.

Yet she bore up, living the past year over again, clinging to its memories as to her most precious possession, hoping steadfastly, praying humbly, praying, indeed, with desperate fervour when the winds blew. Yet—for the Cottage on the cliff stood neighbourless—there were nights when she would fain have been anywhere but where she was; when panic gripped her, and she would for choice have been in the closest alley, the darkest lane by the water-side, if she might have had beside her women in like case to whom she might cry her fears from the window and share theirs, and so have been less alone with her fancies. For on the cliff-face the winds had their will, and of rough nights the voice

of the sea, as it strove with the point, rose up and menaced her with its thunder.

In the day-time she was glad to be there. From her windows as from an eyrie she could sweep the distant horizon for a sail, and not seldom she sat long hours on the watch, though she knew that her search was useless, that no return could be looked for yet, and that the odds were that news would come another way. She wearied her eyes with gazing, now into the shining distances, now at the white work on her lap; while the Captain, watching her with furtive solicitude, saw that she looked with each day more fagged, her features sharper.

But she bore up bravely. None the less when Charlotte walked in rather abruptly one Monday, some ten days after the brig's departure, her agitation told a tale. Her hand flew to her breast, and such colour as she still had deserted her face. 'Not news?' she cried. 'Not ——'

'No!' Charlotte said bluntly. 'News? Certainly not! It is not to be expected yet. You know that, silly. But I bring something else, and something worth having.'

'What?' And still she could not drive the anxiety from her voice, nor the eager look from her eyes.

'A friend — if you will see him. If not — if you had really rather not, Peggy, there are no bones broken. He is not here to worry you.'

'A friend?' Peggy repeated in wonder — she had so few friends. 'No — not ——'

'It's Sir Albergy,' Charlotte said. 'That's all, my dear. He is outside if you would like to see him.'

Peggy's pale face flushed. 'Oh, I don't,' she stammered, 'I don't think that I ——'

'But I think,' Charlotte rejoined, seeing how it was and determined to take the thing into her own hands. 'I want you to see him, Peggy. It will be good for you, dear. He is a true friend, and they are not to be picked up in every ditch. They are rare, my dear,' Charlotte repeated, her

colour rising a tone. 'And he is true as steel and loyal as ——'

'As you are yourself!' Peggy exclaimed, tears rising to her eyes. 'You dear girl! No sister was ever ——'

'Sister!' Charlotte ejaculated with contempt. 'Don't compare me to a sister if you please — unless you want to quarrel with me! Sisters indeed! A plague on your sisters! I wouldn't give that for one, from what I see of them!' And she snapped her fingers. 'No, I bring you a brother, and that's another kind of thing, or I'm mistaken! Sister!' Charlotte repeated, anxious to give Peggy time to recover herself. 'If he don't stick closer than a sister I'm a bigger fool than I think I am! Let me fetch him.'

A prey to more emotions than one, Peggy hesitated. Then 'Fetch him,' she said.

He came in a little awkwardly, but his greeting was simple and like himself. 'We cannot,' he said, 'have too many friends, Mrs. Bligh. And I dare not lose one.'

'I am blessed in two,' she replied, smiling through her tears.

'In one you are certainly blest,' he said gravely, and he looked at Charlotte. 'I envy her and I congratulate you. Such friends are rare, Mrs. Bligh.'

'That is agreed,' Charlotte said, though her eyes shone. 'We settled that before you came in, sir. You must find something new to say.'

'I thought that Charlotte might have news!' Peggy said, eyeing him closely. She could not get away from that; from the hope and the fear.

'We must not expect it yet,' he replied cheerfully. 'Perhaps in another fortnight we may begin to look for it. Mr. Bligh has made so many long voyages — I suppose he has spent half his life at sea — that he would smile at our expectations.' And deftly turning the conversation to Bligh's experiences, and in particular to his service in the *Naiad* when she had cruised, as a part of Sir Borlase Warren's squadron

off Arcachon, he pressed the matter. He had never heard the rights of that affair; he would be glad to hear them. Peggy was induced to tell the story, and grew warm in the telling. Her eyes shone, she reddened with indignation, she looked a different creature. Charlotte, seated close to Wyke, murmured 'Bravo!' in his ear, and pleading ignorance of the sea-terms that Peggy uttered so glibly, egged her on. Sir Albery chimed in, echoing the wife's indignation at the scurvy treatment that Bligh had suffered at the Admiral's hands — but he was a man with a certain reputation, he added: arbitrary, he had heard, and too proud to own to a mistake. 'Not popular in the Service, I am told. Such men — but possibly I may misjudge him — hamper themselves, and lack support when they most need it. A stiff man, I gather, though I may be mistaken.'

By the time that they had rightly or wrongly judged and condemned Sir Borlase, and Wyke had drawn a sharp contrast between him and the sailors' idol Nelson, who never, he said, forgot the man who sailed under him, and resented a slight to one of his captains as an offence against himself, they were all on easy terms, and Peggy had for twenty minutes at least forgotten her anxiety. Charlotte, viewing the change with delight, could not refrain from repeating 'Bravo!' under her breath, and when Wyke coloured, laughed aloud. Apparently he had thought out the subjects he would raise for he passed on to the wonderful luck that some ships had, and quoted the case of the *Thetis* and the *Santa Brigida* eighteen months before. The capture had been worth forty thousand pounds to the captain of the lucky frigate and five thousand to each of the lieutenants.

'But little enough to the crew, I expect,' Charlotte said.

'No, indeed. I believe every A.B. took a hundred and fifty.'

'Well, that was a stroke of luck!' she agreed, while Peggy's eyes grew thoughtful and she immersed herself in calculations.

'But we must not expect such luck as that,' Sir Albergy said cautiously, and he explained the circumstances. Then it was Charlotte's turn. She had seen the Exeter paper, and she brought the prospects of peace on the carpet. It was believed to be very near. There was talk of a meeting to settle the terms — at Amboise or at Amiens — she could not remember which, but it began with an A. She thought Amiens, and she was explaining why, when a tap on the door surprised them.

Peggy rose. 'I am afraid,' she said with a touch of her old gaiety, 'it is the baker. If you call at a cottage, Sir Albergy, it must not shock you if the bread comes in through the parlour.'

'Those are not the things that shock me,' he said. 'Let me be your footman.'

But Peggy was before him. She opened the door, and there, confronting her, stood her sister, her hands in her muff.

'Augusta !' Peggy cried.

It was an awkward moment for Augusta; more awkward than she knew, for Peggy's figure filled the doorway and Augusta did not see that there were other visitors present. If she had, her greeting might have been different. 'Well, my dear,' she said good-humouredly, 'you've brought your pigs to a pretty market !' She had to break the ice, and it seemed to her well to do it at once and thoroughly.

'Come in,' Peggy answered. 'I have visitors,' she added a little shyly. She made way for the other to enter.

Out of the tail of her eye Augusta, as she crossed the threshold, saw who they were, and she felt that the fates were against her. But she would not have been Augusta if she had not made the best of it. She would have embraced Peggy, but she did not know how her sister would take it, so she contented herself with pecking her cheek. 'Dear Peggy !' she said. 'So here you are ! And here I am ! Father at last, dear ——' she seemed for the first time

to recognise Charlotte, and, breaking off, nodded gaily to her. 'Well, I never !' she exclaimed, 'this is an unexpected meeting !'

'Perfectly !' said Charlotte.

'And Sir Albery ! I confess' — in her annoyance Augusta could not refrain from the thrust — 'I did not expect to find you here !'

'No ?' he said. 'Yet I do not see why, Miss Portnal.'

She had no answer ready, and while he busied himself pushing forward a chair Charlotte replied for her. 'Augusta is a little late herself,' she said. 'However, never mind, Augusta,' she continued in a rallying tone. 'Better late, my dear, than never !'

For once Augusta had need of all her aplomb. She felt the atmosphere unfriendly, and the notion that Sir Albery and Charlotte had called in company was upsetting. But she smiled, and ignoring Charlotte's hit, 'I am relieved to see Peggy looking so well,' she said. 'I can see that you have done her good already.'

'Oh, don't give us the credit,' Charlotte retorted. 'I've no doubt it's the surprise of seeing you has brought the colour to her cheeks. It's a pity you did not come before, my dear.'

Sir Albery, who man-like, hated a scene, put himself between them. 'I think Mrs. Bligh is looking better,' he said.

'The better for seeing you all !' Peggy replied. Then, turning timidly to her sister, 'I hope that my father is well ?' she said.

'Quite well,' Augusta rejoined, and played her trump card, the value of which she had only grasped during the last minute. 'He bade me give you his love, Peggy.'

The colour fled from Peggy's face, and returned with a rush. 'Oh, I am glad !' she murmured. 'I am glad. Thank you, dear.' She gripped one hand in the other in the effort to control her emotion, but the tears rose to her eyes.

'Well, that's something,' Charlotte said grudgingly. 'I hope that he's on the way too. It is time, I am sure.'

'I think he will be soon,' Augusta replied.

'At any rate he has let you come.'

'Yes.' Augusta managed without more to convey the impression that she had striven to that end and succeeded. 'But that is not all, Peggy,' she continued in a lower tone. 'He sent you his blessing, dear.' She knew, as she said it, that she had risen to the top of the occasion and done herself justice.

Peggy looked at her with brimming eyes and with difficulty stifled a sob. Sir Albery saw that she was agitated and he rose. 'I am afraid I must be going,' he said. 'I am glad to leave you, Mrs. Bligh, so much happier, and with one care removed.'

'I must be going, too,' Charlotte said. 'It is well that some people are coming to their senses, Augusta. Good-bye, my dear. See you soon, but never more glad to see you than here and now. And heart up, Peggy! Courage, and courage, and again courage! All will be well.'

She hugged Peggy, and was moving towards the door that Wyke had opened for her, when a sound caught their ears and drew their eyes to one another. It was not an uncommon sound in that place, for it was only the tread of someone descending the steep path, and it was possible even to say who it was—the clump of the Captain's wooden leg weighted every other step. But the pace was hurried, it was the pace of one who brings news, it arrested not only the ear but the heart. Charlotte paused, Wyke stepped out to the wicket. Aware of the open door and the listening ears behind him, he grasped the need of caution, and he passed through the gate. He was in time to meet the Captain, who, out of breath, was pegging his way down the track. Wyke raised his hand. 'Steady!' he said in a low voice. 'We must not alarm Mrs. Bligh, sir!'

'No, no,' the old man stuttered, but in his eagerness he

still tried to go by the other. 'No! It's — it's not that!'

'Steady!' Wyke repeated the word more sharply. He barred the way. 'Have a care! For God's sake, sir, don't frighten her!'

But the Captain was already at the wicket, and it was too late. Peggy had broken from Charlotte's grasp; she had come out to them, and the others followed perforce. They stood grouped on one side of the fence, Wyke and the Captain on the other. The old man, panting and struggling for breath, rested his trembling hand on the gate. His face worked. For a moment, a moment of suspense for all, he could not speak.

Then 'There's news!' he gasped, and at the word Charlotte slipped her arm round Peggy. 'Not — not bad news!' he got out jerkily. 'No, no! Not bad news, thank God! But — but strange — strange news if it's true!' His voice whistled in his throat. 'If it's true!'

CHAPTER XXVI

CAPTAIN COPESTAKE, retired Master Mariner of Portsea, had much to be thankful for. At home and abroad he had the comforts that the hearts of sailor men desire. Within-doors he had a clean hearth, a well-ordered house, as much rum as was good for him, and leave to smoke his pipe — for Mrs. Ozias was a reasonable as well as a notable woman — everywhere except in bed; to say nothing of plum-duff frequently and tripe on Fridays. On Sundays he enjoyed all the solace that a long-winded minister and an approving conscience could give him, lived his sins over again, and luxuriated in the remembrance — he called it the repentance — of them. Abroad he had his house of call, his own special chair, in winter by the fire, in summer beside the snug red-curtained window, and he was never without a shilling in his pocket.

Then he had the Hard to walk on and Gosport to visit when he needed a sea-change; to say nothing of a number of old cronies with whom to pass the time while he shared with them the labour of propping up the posts on the quays, or levelling a glass from the Platform. There was not a craft in harbour between Porchester Castle and the Block-house that he did not know from coamings to masthead, that he had not surveyed and measured until he knew her lines with his eyes shut; nor, as long as daylight lasted, did a vessel pass the Point, inward or outward, laden or in ballast, from his Majesty's three-deckers riding high in their pride to the humblest long-shore tub, that he and his fellows did not mark her handling, criticise her Master, commend or deride.

The port, gay with bunting and movement and the show of war, noisy with the ringing of hammers and the 'Heave-ho !' of chanting maties, was Ozias's picture-book, ever open, its pages ever turning and of interest; and he knew it as a College Don knows his 'Odes' or his often-studied 'Æneid.'

It was an ideal life; such a life as the seaman, aloft in rocking gales, or battling on deck with icy seas, dreams of, as of a haven far off and hardly attainable. And Ozias admitted his good fortune. Yet, so weak is human nature and so strong is habit, that there were days when he was not as well content as was reasonable; when his wife's apron-string irked him, and he resented the watchfulness of the black eyes that owned him. At such times the plum-duff seemed too rich, the yarns of his fellows palled, and even the excitement of the Point and the sad seamanship of the younger school lost their power to engross him.

'I be an unregenerate toad, Jonah,' he would say, when driven to open himself to a congenial spirit. 'The old Adam's in me to that extent there's times when I think the ways of pleasantness are not for me, so dyed I be in the dip of wickedness. So dyed I be,' he continued gloomily, his eyes bent on the water beneath him, 'that no fuller on earth can bleach me.'

'Your woman has done something that way,' the other replied slyly. 'She ha' tried anyway, Ozias.'

'Ay, she ha' tried,' Ozias agreed despondently. 'She be too good for me, Jonah.'

'A good woman as women go,' Jonah said cautiously. 'Her puddings, I am told ——'

'Ay, rare. Rare they be — and filling. But' — Ozias sighed as he scanned the offing — 'there's days when, God forgive me, I'd give 'em all for a morsel of hard tack and a tot from the rum-tub, and to be running free with a clear sky and a spanking breeze abaft and a prize in chase !

D'ye see the guns ready to run out, Jonah, and the lads stripped at their quarters and the beauty you're aboard of lifting and lurching with a following sea and the long swivel ready to throw a shot across her?' Ozias groaned, and 'God forgive me, Jonah!' he went on. 'I know they be the flesh-pots of Egypt, but there be days when I smell the salt and I do hanker — I do hanker after them.'

'I tell 'ee what it is, Ozias,' his friend said. 'You be wanting a glass.' He looked hopefully at the Admiral Vernon, not a stone's throw away. 'A glass be what you be wanting and you'd tell your blessings.'

'I'd ought to, I'd ought to! And I'd not say it wouldn't hearten me,' Ozias agreed, and he was about to turn in the desired direction when something caught his eye. 'What be that silly brigantine a-doing?' he demanded in a brisker tone. 'Does the d — d tailor think he can get in with this wind?'

The wind was due north and there were half a dozen sail standing off and on, waiting for it to shift that they might enter the harbour. Three of these had been there since dawn of the day before, and the skilled eyes turned on them knew them for victuallers inward bound from Gibraltar or the Channel Squadron. Two others had come up in the night, a timber ship from Norway, and a sloop of war — her number and name were known and the bum-boats had already raced out to her with soft tack and vegetables. But the sixth, a brigantine with a patched foresail, had only come up Channel at mid-day. If the wind held there might be presently a score standing off and on opposite Southsea beach waiting to slip in, for in those days to reach a harbour and to enter it were two different things.

It was the handling of the brigantine that had caught Copestake's eye. She seemed to be doing her best to effect the impossible by beating into port in the wind's eye. 'Working his jacks for the sake o' working!' he commented

sourly. 'She'd need be quick in stays or the fool will pile her up on Haslar!' He spat contemptuously into the water.

'She be signalling!' said the other. 'That's what she be come in for, Ozias.'

'Ay, so she be,' Ozias agreed. 'Now what's that for?' He scanned her with a knowing eye. 'Levant trade, d'you think, Jonah?'

'There or thereabout.' A moment later. 'She's asking for a saw-bones I wouldn't wonder.'

'And putting out a boat! May be despatches! They'll come to the postern.' On which the two men, glad of any distraction, straightened themselves and yawned, and after pausing, first to assure themselves that the boat was coming in, and secondly to take that glance round the offing without which no old salt turns from the sea, they made their way towards the stairs. Ozias forgot his discontent, and Jonah postponed his afternoon dram.

But a meeting with a friend at the end of the Platform detained them, and there were other idlers on the front. By the time they arrived, Ozias and his mate found themselves cut off from the stairs by a curious crowd, five or six deep. The brigantine's boat slid in, and the seamen manning it tossed their oars inboard under a hail of questions, the answers to which did not reach our couple in the rear. They had to make the best of the information that filtered through to them second-hand, and largely mingled with oaths.

Ozias caught a word here and there, and presently he gripped the man before him to ensure attention. 'What? Six, d'ye say, mate?' he asked.

'Ay, six! And two put overboard day 'fore yesterday. Cut about terrible they be, 'cording to them. They've come in for a saw-bones to sort 'em to rights, 'fore they land 'em.'

'The Frenchies was it?'

'D — n 'em, who else should it be?'

'But she ain't marked !' Ozias urged impatiently, pinching his victim. 'She come off the port at eight-bells noon, you must ha' seen her ! She've not a scratch nor a splinter o' white wood about her ! Nor a gun aboard, you fool !'

'She took 'em off ! Took 'em off, I tell ye !' the man retorted irritably. He wanted to listen, not to talk. 'Have ye no ears on ye ? South of Ushant 'twas, off a ——'

'Off what ?'

'Off a brig — she took 'em — Letter o' Marque — crippled and like to sink ! Corvette — French sloop o' war ye understand — in company, and leaking like hell ! Don't know,' the man continued with a sudden burst of enthusiasm, 'as I ever heard the like, blast me if I did ! Dismasted the Frenchman they did, and bore off and on, raking her fore and aft, till she struck ! And not fifty of a crew ! Corvette closed once but fell away 'fore they could board, d — n 'em !'

'Fore the sloop could board ?'

'Ay, ay ! Who else ! The brig hammered her for hours, she did, and took her at last ! By G — d, she did ! She took her !'

'Took the corvette ?' Ozias exclaimed incredulously. 'Took the Frenchman ?' And again he shook the man, who in his desire to pick up more was at his mercy. 'D'ye mean it, mate ? Took the corvette ? The Letter o' Marque did ?'

'They did, I tell ye ! So these chaps say.'

'Well I'm d — d !' Ozias said, disentangling the tale at last. 'That's a rum thing as ever I heard.'

'Rum ?' the other swore, dancing up and down on his toes in his appreciation. 'The rummest thing I ever heard talk of ! Lord sink me, man, I could kiss the chaps that fought her, blast their eyes. But there, it's no good pinching me, I don't know no more than I've told you, and the boat's hauling off to wait for the surgeon. She come up, this here brigantine, and found 'em refitting and pumping to save their lives — both leaking like sieves — and she took

off the worst of the wounded. Left the two crippled in a sea, and doubtful seemin'ly if they'll bring 'em in.'

'Well, I'm a sinner !' Ozias exclaimed. 'A sloop o' war, mind ye ! Why she'd ha' ninety of a crew at the least ! A hundred more like !'

'She was waiting for her, so they think !'

'And caught a Tartar !'

'By gum, she did — caught a Tartar and no mistake !' the man swore with gusto. And the crowd beginning to break up amid laughter and some cheering, he turned to his tormentor. 'Hang me, if you ain't pinched my arm black and blue !' he said reproachfully. 'But it is worth it and all ! Don't know as I ever heard the like !'

'I'll treat,' said Ozias briefly. 'Come along of us, mate, and we'll wet the news. Did ye hear where the Letter o' Marque hailed from ?'

The man hadn't caught the name. But soothed by the prospect of a dram he called to a neighbour who was also turning away, and asked him. This man had heard the name — the name of the port and of the brig — and he told them. To his astonishment Ozias gripped the speaker by the arm. 'Skipper hurt ?' he cried. 'Eh ? Did ye hear, man ?'

'Ay ! Splinter, side of the head ! Knocked silly, they say, but kept the deck like a good 'un, and saw it out ! D'ye know him ?'

Ozias did not answer, and to this day the man whose arm he had pinched black and blue thinks him the meanest of swabs. For, forgetful of his offer and of everything but the news that he had heard, Ozias turned his back on his new friend and the Admiral Vernon, deserted his mate, and at a clumsy seaman's trot made away for Portsea. What he said to the buxom woman who owned him, or how he dealt with her is not recorded, but a lugger that went out at sunset, bound for Plymouth, carried Ozias as a passenger, and the morning light saw him landed at the Barbican.

CHAPTER XXVII

THAT was the news that Captain Copestake brought to Beremouth on that fine May day in 1801. Old Captain Bligh happened to be in town, his attention was drawn to the excited group that had gathered about Ozias, he approached, and Ozias, breaking away from the others, drew him aside and told his story — told it with such reservations as, being a man of slow but sure wits, he thought proper. He said nothing to the old man of the shattered state in which the *Lively Peggy* and her prize had been left, or of the doubts entertained of their safety. Bad news would travel fast enough, details such as these could wait; and for himself he judged that the man who had captured the French sloop of war with a crew outnumbering his own as two to one was not the man to let a craft sink under his feet. Sufficient for the day was the deed, and for Beremouth the triumph. And loudly Ozias hymned it.

To some he told more, but he cautioned them. 'His wife's in a delikit state,' he explained, with more consideration than might have been expected of him. 'No need to scare her, mind ye! But, lord bless you, he's not the man I think him if he don't come through and bring his sheaves with him!' Like most sons of the open sea Ozias was a generous soul, and if he had captured the corvette himself he could not have been more triumphant; or bragged the stronger oaths of the glory accruing to Beremouth.

The story had flown abroad and was known half-way up the steep street before the old Captain, gathering his scattered wits together, limped away, the heart that beat so tu-

multously in his lean breast overflowing with pride and thankfulness ! With all his eagerness to tell the news he was more than once forced to stop and wipe the sweat from his brow ; nor could he ever remember how he climbed the hill to the churchyard. But the determination to be the bearer of the tidings gave him strength, and he arrived at the Cottage as we have seen, his legs trembling under him and his tongue disabled by excitement.

'Strange — strange news if it's true !' he gasped, his voice breaking. Poor man, his life had known few moments of triumph, and this was such a moment. It seemed too good to be real.

But Wyke, alarmed on Peggy's account, was impatient of delay, and he could have shaken the old man. 'For God's sake, say what it is, sir !' he urged. 'Don't you see that you are frightening Mrs. Bligh ?'

'He's — he's taken a French corvette !' the Captain stammered. 'She attacked him — he's taken her ! A sloop — sloop of war, d'you understand ? He's — he's taken her !' He waved his arms in his excitement.

Peggy snatched herself from Charlotte's arm. 'Is he there ?' she cried, prepared to fly to him. 'Is he there ?' She tried with a shaking hand to open the wicket. What did it matter what he had taken if he was there ?

'No, my dear, no,' the Captain said, a little sobered. 'He is not there, no ! But news has come. A vessel that came into Portsmouth yesterday brought the — the news.'

'But he was safe ?' she breathed. 'You are sure ?'

'Safe ? Yes, my dear, safe — quite safe, I understand.'

'Thank God !' she cried. For her that was all. 'Thank God !' She burst into tears and hid her face on Charlotte's shoulder, while the other patted her like a mother.

'There, there, my dear,' Charlotte said. 'Look up and think what great news it is ! He's safe ! He will be with you soon.'

'But a sloop of war ?' Wyke said, dwelling on the words.

He dreaded a mistake. The old man was excited, was beside himself. And it was a strange, an improbable tale. Could it be that he had heard amiss? 'You are quite sure, Captain Bligh? Who brought the news from Portsmouth, pray?'

'Copestake! He saw the vessel that brought in the — the wounded. And he came away at once. South of Ushant it was,' the Captain continued more glibly, his tongue loosened now that he had his breath. 'Some think that she was waiting for them. The *Peggy* crippled her main-mast and bore off and on, raking her — the other could not bring her broadside to bear. But the corvette brought down the *Peggy's* main-top — that's what I understand — and before Charles could clear away the raffle she fell alongside and they'd ha' boarded, but by the mercy of God the *Peggy* slipped clear before she could fasten to her. And then they — they went on hammering her!'

Peggy raised her head, and her eyes shone like stars through her tears. 'He meant to do it!' she cried. 'He meant to do it! And I knew that he would do it, if he lived! Oh, let us thank God for it!'

'It's wonderful news!' Sir Albery said warmly — but there was still a spice of doubt in his tone. 'Wonderful news! And I congratulate you, Mrs. Bligh. I congratulate you with all my heart!'

'Dear Peggy!' Charlotte said. 'Dear little heroine! And I know of more heroes than one,' she added, her eyes on Wyke.

'They are all heroes!' Peggy cried. 'The poor brave men!' But that was not what the other meant. 'Were there many hurt?' she continued timidly.

'Six were landed!' the Captain murmured, thinking that the less said about that matter the better.

'A great feat!' Wyke pronounced warmly. 'A noble feat. I really hope that he may be reinstated, Mrs. Bligh. We must see that the facts are known. Such a thing

has not been done since the Falmouth Packet beat off the *Atalante*! The country will ring with it, or I am mistaken!’

Peggy bloomed. ‘Oh, you think he may!’ she cried, clasping her hands in a transport of gratitude. ‘You think he may!’

‘I think it is possible,’ Wyke said more cautiously. ‘We must do what we can to spread the facts.’

She was all tearful thankfulness, and would have stood there in that blessed spot, tasting and savouring the news for an hour if Charlotte had not intervened. ‘You must come in now, Peggy,’ she said. ‘You really must, my dear.’

‘Yes,’ Wyke said, ‘and I see that there are some people coming down the path. They have heard the news, I expect, and we had better go in for a moment, and then leave Mrs. Bligh to herself.’

‘It is not joy that hurts me,’ she said, smiling happily. ‘Oh, I do thank, I do thank heaven!’

But she complied. Wyke and Captain Bligh went in with them. They all crowded into the cottage, filling the little room.

Wyke had been right in his conjecture, as the next minute proved. Less thoughtful than Copestake, or believing with Peggy that joy does not harm even ‘delikit’ women, a score of enthusiasts from the water-side had started out to honour the hero, and wish his partner joy. They had gathered strength as they marched through the town, spreading the news and singing ‘Hearts of Oak’; so that by the time they halted before the cottage and lined up along the path they were a hundred strong — watermen, old salts, quay loafers, a rough crew, singing, laughing, cheering, but to a man moved by honest pride in the thing that had been done, the thing that had glorified Beremouth. Someone stepped to the front, as they ranged themselves with their faces to the cottage, and lifting his hand, set them once more thundering in unison ‘Hearts of oak are our ships! Hearts of oak

are our men,' the stern and moving air that in the Service of that day summoned men to quarters and to battle.

There was more than one heart within the cottage that rose high on the strain, more than one of those present whose eyes brightened. But when, the song ended, the leader of the band called for three cheers for Captain Bligh, and three cheers for the *Lively Peggy*, and the cheers were given with a will that shook the very walls of the cottage, Peggy surprised them all. Charlotte would have held her back, fearing the effect upon her; and Augusta would fain have done the same, deeming it beneath her sister to take notice of the men. But Peggy would not be restrained. She opened the door and went out; and when the rough fellows looked on the young wife's face, aglow with pride and wet with tears, every head was bared and every tongue was silent.

'Dear friends and neighbours,' she said, and her clear, sweet voice, tremulous with feeling, touched a chord in the rudest breast. 'I thank you from my heart. God bless you, and may He bring all safe home to us!'

That was all; but how they cheered her, as Charlotte, laughing and nodding, drew her in again! In their enthusiasm they would have stayed and cheered interminably, but Sir Albery went out, gave the leader a guinea to drink Mrs. Bligh's health, and with the guinea a hint; and they trooped tumultuously away to the Privateersman and the Keppel, there to celebrate the occasion in a fitting manner. It was felt, indeed, in the little port that to go sober to bed that night was a tempting of Providence, a thankless act, or, in Captain Copestake's phrase, 'a cheapening of vouchsafed mercies!'

But if there was triumph down by the water, and in the little room on the cliff-face where the old man and the girl-wife sat hand-in-hand a thankfulness as deep, here and there in lane and court there were quaking hearts and anxious faces. Distracted women to whom the news had come in fragments ran from door to door, asking questions that none

could answer. They invaded Copestake in his cups, plucked at his sleeve with fluttering hands, insisted on knowing 'Was my Bill hurt?' or 'D'ye know aught o' my Jack?' — questions that caused that mariner sad discomfort. For the story of the six wounded had gone abroad, and where there were wounded there were like to be dead. Ozias swore to each that her man was safe; but the comfort was cold, there was no telling, and one woman, ignorant of the distance, started at day-break to tramp to Portsmouth, carrying her babe with her. She was sent back four days later by the Exeter wagon, at the cost of a charitable Justice who had heard her story.

Strange to say, though within half an hour of Copestake's arrival the town was humming with the news, no one conveyed it to the Rector, deeply as he was concerned in it. It was his sermon-day, an occasion that came but once in three weeks, and his order that he was not to be disturbed on that day was imperative. Even so, Wignall hesitated. He felt that the tidings excused much, and he ventured as far as the door. But the Rector's temper had been odd of late, and with his hand on the latch the butler's heart misgave him, and he retreated. So the Rector wrote on in peace until late in the afternoon. Then having completed his task he felt the need of a breath of fresh air, and issuing forth he took his hat and gold-headed cane and left the house. The first persons whom he met as he entered the churchyard were Augusta and Sir Albercy Wyke, returning from the Cottage.

There had been a little awkwardness when Wyke, after the departure of the crowd, had risen to take leave. The two girls had risen also; their way and his way were the same, and for a moment they had looked at one another — women will understand how. Then Charlotte, impelled by a feeling of which she was afterwards ashamed, suggested that Augusta might like to have a few minutes with her sister.

But Augusta had put the offer by with a smile. 'Not to-day,' she said, her hands in her muff. 'Peggy will like to be alone to think it over.'

Peggy didn't say her nay, and Charlotte, despising herself, hastened to announce that she was going home by the road, and before the others could move had taken herself off. Finesse was not in her nature, she could not imagine what in the world had possessed her, and she scolded herself roundly. 'I'll write "plain Charlotte" on a piece of paper,' she determined, 'and perhaps that will remind me not to make a fool of myself!' And then 'I am as mean as she is,' she thought with shame, 'and without her excuse.'

Wyke and Augusta, therefore, had left the Cottage together, Augusta, as they walked, dilating with sisterly affection on this happy turn in Peggy's fortunes. 'I am so glad,' she added, 'so glad that my father suffered me to go to her — before this was known!'

'It was very well,' Wyke replied. He could not banish a certain dryness from his tone.

'It is such splendid news!' Augusta continued with rapture. 'Such a surprising thing, too!'

'Yes,' he agreed, 'it is — if the story be true, Miss Portnal.'

It had not occurred to Augusta to doubt it. She did not know enough of the things of the sea to appreciate its uncommon nature, though it had crossed her mind to question its propriety. A dispensation that allowed misconduct to be condoned and disobedience rewarded seemed to her improper. She would have died before she would have owned to the feeling, but it recurred, and it underlay her tone as she answered with a certain uplift in her voice. 'You feel some doubt, then, Sir Albery? You don't feel sure that the news is true?'

'Well,' he admitted soberly, 'it is such a very unusual thing for a private vessel to have the better of a warship that — that I am afraid I do doubt. As a rule such a ship surrenders when overtaken by a force so superior — the

odds are too great. If she should resist the cost of victory must be heavy, yet we hear of no loss of life — only of six wounded — a light bill. Still, I don't see how Copestake could be mistaken, and Captain Bligh no doubt told us the tale as it was told to him. We can only trust that there is no mistake, for the blow to your sister whose hopes have been raised would be cruel ! Cruel !' he repeated with feeling.

'It would indeed,' Augusta agreed. 'Poor, poor Peggy ! It is so much more than she can have expected !'

'Than anyone can have expected ! Let us hope that the story is true.'

It was at this point that they saw the Rector's portly figure coming towards them. 'Oh, father !' Augusta cried, as they met. 'Isn't it wonderful ?'

'What, my dear ?' he said. 'What is wonderful ?'

'You have not heard the news — of the brig ?'

The Rector's heart lost a beat. But he saw that, whatever the news was, it could not be bad. 'What is the news ?' he asked. 'And who brought it ?'

'Copestake,' Wyke answered. 'He heard it at Portsmouth and came over with it. According to him the *Lively Peggy* fell in with a French corvette of Ushant — a little to the south I understand, and engaged her and has taken her !'

'Taken her !' the Rector exclaimed in astonishment. The others could see that he was moved — and shaken. But they attributed his agitation to the surprise that was natural.

'Fought her and taken her !' Sir Albergy repeated. 'So the story goes. It's amazing if it be true.'

'And — and Bligh ?' The Rector's eyes as he spoke avoided theirs.

'He is said to be safe,' Wyke replied. 'That is certain, I understand. We've just come from Mrs. Bligh's. What is it, Rector ?'

For Portnal had drawn in his breath in an odd way. 'Only — a little spasm,' he explained. He took out his handker-

chief and passed it across his brow. 'Nothing! Nothing! He's safe, then — Bligh?' he asked. 'You are sure of that, Wyke?'

'Certainly — if Copestake is right.'

The Rector surprised them both, his daughter more than Sir Alberty. 'Thank God!' he said in a tone so earnest, and so different from the pitch of his voice in church that Wyke got a new view of him. 'Thank God!' he repeated reverently. 'I — I was afraid for my daughter!' And again, as if he could not contain himself, 'Thank God!' he repeated. 'He is very merciful!' Then, recovering himself and in a voice more like his own, 'A shock to her would be — would be very serious just now,' he said.

Wyke had never liked the man so well. He had never known him as he was, it seemed. 'Just so,' he agreed heartily. 'But I'd better tell you the story.' And he repeated Ozias's tale as he had had it from the old Captain, to whom, as we know, Copestake had not communicated all that he knew. 'It's an amazing feat,' he said in conclusion, 'look at it how you will.'

'If it be true,' Augusta suggested, recalling the misgivings that he had expressed.

The Rector frowned. 'Is there any doubt about it?' he asked.

'I don't think so,' Wyke said. But he spoke as if he did doubt. 'I don't see how there can be, Rector. If a landsman had reported it, I should feel, I confess, great doubt. A good deal of doubt. But Copestake —'

'Copestake should know,' the Rector agreed, welcoming that view of it. 'Anyway the news should be in the journals in a day or two. You did not hear who the wounded were?'

'No; Copestake came away without waiting to learn particulars. It would have been better if he had waited, I think.'

'It would,' the Rector decided. 'Certainly it would. I think I will send a messenger to Portsmouth to see the men

in hospital and to learn particulars — and what can be done for them. But I suppose the brig may be in at any time now ?’

‘I’m afraid not yet,’ Wyke said. ‘The brigantine that brought the news appears to have entered the Channel before the wind shifted from west to north. But Copestake thinks that the brig and her prize would meet a head wind while still in the Bay, and may not be in for some days. They were still refitting when the brigantine left them, and the sea was getting up.’

‘They’d beat to westwards ?’

‘No doubt they’d get off the French coast as soon as possible. Copestake put them about a degree west of Penmarch Point, and thought that if the sea was not too high they might land in the boats such of the prisoners as they did not need for working.’

‘May be. He should know. Well,’ with a sigh that betrayed a lingering anxiety, ‘I will go on.’ And nodding to Wyke in a way that showed that his thoughts were elsewhere, he pursued his walk.

He was thankful, profoundly thankful. More than once he bared his head and his lips moved. But mingled with his thankfulness, underlying it like a tiny but deadly snake hidden beneath a basket of luscious fruit, were misgivings that he strove to ignore. He had some knowledge of sea matters and he had a vision of the brig and her prize heaving, a cable’s length apart, in broken water, with the brig’s guns shotted and bearing on the Frenchman. He could hear the wind screaming through the rattle of torn cordage, and the shattered mast beating against the hull that trembled with every shock. He saw the French crew driven under hatches, and men naked to the waist labouring in a frenzy of haste to cut away the crippled spars — men with bandages about their heads, working in fear of their lives to set up jury masts. He saw the lookout sweeping the offing in mingled fear and hope, heard the hoarse orders, and read

the alarm in men's faces, heard their curses, as the wind shifted to north and forced them to beat out into the Atlantic !

He tried to put misgiving from him. All had gone so well, so much had been done and won, if this marvellous story was true, that surely the skill and courage that had wrought wonders might be trusted to surmount the difficulties that remained. But he strove with less success than he could have wished. At moments the spectre of a Nemesis would lift its head, would shadow his thoughts, would haunt him; and fond of money as he was, he would willingly have lost all that he stood to gain for the certain news that the *Lively Peggy* lay safe in port.

Yet it was hard to suppose that there was a mistake. Copestake — Copestake should know, if any one did. So, little by little, he reassured himself. He walked more briskly. He swung his cane and put his years behind him, cheered by the pleasant air, the peaceful scene, the evening stillness.

CHAPTER XXVIII

AS LONG as there were new listeners to gather about him Ozias sang his song of triumph, and bathed himself in the pleasure that rewards the bearer of strange news. But the Beremouth folk were few, and when he had exhausted his audience, he bethought him of an outstanding claim and of one to whom it was his duty in a special degree to impart his tidings. He called for a boat, chose the best of a dozen that were eagerly offered, and two minutes later he was on his way to the Cove. One treat, and a high treat, still remained — to tell the story to the owner of the *Lively Peggy*; and with enthusiasm, simple soul as he was, Cope-stake pictured the joyful amazement with which it would be welcomed.

The man who rowed the boat and was aware of his purpose took another view of the matter. For as they rounded the Point, 'The old man,' he said, 'do keep himself to himself, Cap'en, these days. You'd ought to know that, for sure. 'Twere a terrible blow to him, his nevy going.'

'Ay, ay,' Ozias conceded. ' 'Twould be.' And then, remembering that for the last twenty-four hours he had wallowed in worldly things and that a word was never out of season, 'Poor things we be, Jack,' he said. 'A prudent man foreseeth the evil and hideth himself.'

Jack applied the saying literally. 'Well,' he replied, 'that's what he do do, Cap'en. Hides, he does, and very ugly he's been, late days. 'Tis much if there's a soul in Beremouth has set eyes on him. They do say,' he continued, shaking his head, 'that he be drinking, and drinking alone!'

Ozias came sharply to the surface again. 'Lord's sakes, that's bad!' he said. 'Drinking alone! Oh dear, dear, that's bad! But we'll soon change that,' he continued, recovering his spirits as he thought of the news he bore. 'We'll have him at the Keppel Head 'fore he's a day older, see if we don't! You wait here, my lad,' he added, as the boat grounded, 'and I'll have him down here in two shakes.'

The man shook his head. 'I'd rather you than me, Cap'en. He's the black dog on his back that bad, 'twill take a lot, I'm thinking, to move him!'

'What? Wi' this news?'

'But 'taint news of Joe,' the other said shrewdly. 'Happen he mayn't be as pleased as you think, Master.'

'You're a fool, Jack!' Ozias retorted. He left the boat and strode across the shingle with the foot of a conqueror.

He felt a little less sanguine when he had put his head into the shed and found it silent and deserted. Tools lay here and there, in no order. A boat lay keel uppermost, the gap where a strake had been removed still yawning. Sand had blown in and lay thick on bench and desk. The place had the forlorn look of a work-shop long abandoned. 'By gum!' Ozias muttered, as his eyes travelled over its state and took it in. 'The old man's hard hit, there's no denying!'

He turned from the shed with a sobered face and went up to the house — the white-washed, creeper-clad house that, snugly sheltered on three sides, looked out on the sea; the house that Budgen loved and many a one in Beremouth coveted. As he approached the door, the stillness of the scene impressed him unpleasantly. The garden looked behind-hand and neglected, the potato-hog yawned open and empty, and upon the doorstep stood a bucket that apparently had halted there on its way to the stream. He raised his hand to knock, but in the act he saw through the window the figure of Budgen crouching over the hearth before a handful of fire. Ozias did not need to see the man's face; the attitude

was enough. 'By gum !' he repeated. 'He's took it hard ! He's took it hard surely ! But we'll soon change that or I'm a Dutchman !'

He knocked and without more opened the door and turned into the living-room. His seaman's eye took in a bottle and glass standing on the table at Budgen's elbow; and had there been a second glass, he would have filled it offhand and drunk to the prize and so broken the news in the fashion he deemed most fitting. But there was no second glass, and he did the next best thing. Three strides took him to the man's side. He smacked him on the back. 'Heart up !' he cried jovially. 'There's news ! Good news, man ! No more need to mope !'

The blow brought Budgen to his feet, but the face that he turned on his assailant struck the laugh from Ozias's lips. 'To hell with you,' he snarled. 'What do you ——' And then with the word on his lips, and his eyes still glaring at his visitor, some sobering thought crossed his mind, or the fumes of liquor passed from his brain. The rage died out of his eyes, he raised his hand as if to ward off a blow. 'What — what news ?' he stammered, and if Copestake had never before seen terror in a man's face he saw it then. 'What is it ?'

'Why, Lord ha' mercy, what's the matter with you ?' Ozias retorted, and he hastened to reassure him. 'Why, the best news ! The best ! Why, Budgen, man, what's come to you ? You couldn't look more scared, blind my eyes, if a ghost had come in ! And 'stead of that I bring you news, rare news, glorious news, man ! News that'd curl the hair of a dead corpse, I tell ye !'

But Budgen's eyes still wore that half-veiled look of horror. He muttered something incoherent, he passed his tongue across his lips. 'Is it — is it news o' Joe ?' he muttered.

Ozias rose in his scorn. 'Of that little rat !' he cried. 'It's a deal better than that ! Why, that brig o' yours that

sailed out of here so quiet as may be, her'll be the talk of Devon! Ay, and foreign parts! Her'll be in the papers, and the *Gazette*, I shouldn't wonder! And Rector giving thanks o' Sunday for special mercies! Why, her'll never be forgotten, man — never be forgotten, will the *Lively Peggy*! There's not a Beremouth man don't walk an inch higher and not a stranger but may call for what he wills, and where he wills, and no reckoning!

'But nothing — nothing o' Joe?' Budgen muttered. He looked askance at a dark corner of the floor as if he saw something lurking in the shadow. 'You've heard — nothing of him?'

'Gosh, man!' Ozias retorted, out of patience. 'Can'st think of nothing but him — that rubbishy rag of a chap, when I tell you — but there, I ain't told you! And you'll sing another tune when you've heard! Howsoever, let's taste your tippie, for I'm darned if you wouldn't take the heart out of a flea!' He poured some liquor into Budgen's glass, swigged it off with gusto, and having smacked his lips proceeded to tell the story with many heightening touches and as many oaths of admiration.

Budgen listened, but he listened with the same downcast look. He did not rise to the occasion. As the other said, it would have taken the heart out of a flea. Ozias climbed to greater and greater heights; never had his favourite preacher beaten the desk to more advantage. But to his amazement neither the story nor his comments wiped the look of gloom from Budgen's face. The man did at last, as the tale unfolded itself, speak a word, but his thoughts took a direction that rendered Copestake both angry and unhappy.

'How — how many lost?' he muttered, his eyes averted.

'Lost their numbers? Well, two for certain, poor chaps, and no one more sorry than me! But, Lord, 'tis the fortune of war, and what we're paid for! And cheap, man — cheap at that!'

But, 'Two?' Budgen repeated, and he shivered. He still

kept that sidelong watch on the corner that, as the other said afterwards, made his flesh creep.

'Oh, bother !' Ozias scolded. He began to think that the other had the horrors. 'Darn me, man, never did I see such a wet blanket !'

Budgen shook his head. 'He'll never bring her in,' he muttered.

'Confound you for a Jeremiah !'

'He'll never bring her in !' Budgen repeated drearily. 'And for why ? The brigantine left her half-manned, and crippled. In a sea, with a head wind.'

'That come after, I tell ye !' Ozias argued irritably. ' 'Twas the day after the wind shifted.'

But Budgen took no heed. 'With a head wind,' he muttered, 'and th' enemy's coast under his lee. He'll not save her. 'Tis — 'tis over by now, over, I doubt.'

'You're a liar !' Ozias swore, put beside himself by this evil augury.

'He'll not be let to,' Budgen persisted, his eyes still avoiding Ozias's. 'There's — there's a fate in it.' His gaze rose for a second to the other's face, and fled again. Ozias saw his lips move without sound.

He made Copestake so uncomfortable with his dark words and his darker looks that the man wished that he had not come. 'Well,' he said, 'Budgen you be the coldest of cold comforters in this 'varsal world, and that for certain ! As well never send a ship to sea as call her lost before she's reported ! And bad luck too. And odds are she's safe in Fal-mouth or the Cattewater in half a dozen tides, if she bain't there now !'

Budgen looked at him. 'She'll never see Lizard Head,' he said.

'Well, I'm d — d !' Ozias cried. He felt some fear as well as anger. What if the man did see more in that shadowy corner than was there ? And spoke out of some dark knowledge, not his own, hell-born, may be ! 'See me bring

you news again ! Why, you are worse than the old witch at Netherhampton ! You ought to be swum for an old woman, darn me if you oughtn't !' And he was so disgusted that he was glad to make an end of it and escape — to fling out of the house and stalk fuming and cursing down to the boat.

The man who was waiting for him read his inflamed face aright. 'Well, Cap'en,' he said. 'I told you so.'

Ozias had put one foot in the boat, and was about to thrust off with the other. He changed his mind. He withdrew the foot. 'You are as big a fool as Budgen !' he said viciously. 'If I sit there and listen to you I'll burst. Off you go !' And he thrust off the boat. 'You're all blessed Jeremiahs together ! I would not sail with such a crew on half shares and soft tack, for the best prize afloat. I'll walk !'

The result was that as, still fuming and scolding, he tramped back, taking the longest way to work off his feelings, he met the Rector, who had parted twenty minutes before from his daughter and Wyke. The Rector was striding along with his head in the air, and hope in his heart. Seeing Ozias, the man whom at that moment he most wished to see, he quickened his pace. Ozias could tell him everything, and first hand, he thought.

'Well, Copestake,' he said genially, 'this is grand news that you've brought.'

An hour before Ozias would have crowed like a cock and answered jubilation with jubilation. But he had had his cold douche, and he was out of temper, for in spite of his teeth Budgen's gloomy face haunted him and depressed him. Still he tried to rally. He didn't deny that the news was fine.

'Ay,' he said, 'it's grand news, your reverence, grand news. If so be as all goes well with the brig !'

But this was measured praise. It fell so much below the Rector's expectations that his confidence, a little shaken be-

fore, felt the shock. 'If all goes well?' he repeated. 'Do you mean, then, that you have doubts, Copestake?'

'Well, sir, it depends on whether he brings her in, don't it? That's how 'tis, sir.'

'But I thought — I thought that you had every hope of that?'

Ozias looked about him for a place to spit, but in the Rector's presence he refrained. 'Well, I had!' he allowed frankly, puzzled himself by the change in his feelings. 'Ay, for sure I had. But that there dark owl down there would shake a marble saint, and that's the truth! I wish to heaven I'd never seen his nightmare of a face! You might wring my clothes out since I listened to him, your reverence. He don't answer nor argufy, but squints as if the devil was whispering in his ear, and telling him what's to come of it! I came very near to knocking in his ugly face, and I wish I had! I declare I wish I had! What's the sense o' talking as if all's lost, I'd like to know?'

The lightsomeness had fled from the Rector's face. 'Of whom are you speaking?' he asked, though he knew the answer well. 'Whom have you been seeing, Copestake?'

'Why, the devil himself, I think! Budgen, to be sure! I never knew,' Ozias continued in a burst of confidence, 'such a croaker ship-board or ashore, as what he is! The man won't hear but what they are lost! All lost! Never see the Lizard, never see the Lizard is all his song, as certain as if he could see 'em in Davy's locker this moment! Says it's fate! D — n his fate!' Ozias exclaimed, forgetting in whose company he stood. 'I do b'lieve he thinks his nevy a Jonah, and they must all be lost 'cause his ugly carcass is aboard!'

The Rector's face was very grave as he looked down the road. 'What do you think yourself?' he asked. He wanted comfort badly, but he had little hope of it.

'Well, since I talked to him I don't know what I think. There's risks — of course there's risks!' Ozias repeated ir-

ritably, kicking away a stone. 'There's always risks at sea, same as on land! And there's no denying they be half-manned and half-rigged, and the pumps'll be going, I warn; and odds are they'd have a head-wind out of the Bay. And if they fell in with another mounseer, well, they'd be in poor fettle to fight.'

The Rector's face had grown more and more serious as he listened. 'Then you don't feel much confidence?' he said.

'Confidence!' Ozias spoke querulously. 'Who would feel confidence after talking to that bird of ill omen? For that is what he is, and looks it! Truth is, I don't know. An hour ago I'd ha' said that the man as could take that sloop in fair fight would be man enough to bring her in if he swam behind and pushed her! But since I talked to Budgen — if 'twas Budgen and not the old 'un in his skin — I don't know what to think. Still Mr. Bligh 'll make a thundering good try, I'm sure o' that. He'll bring 'em in if 'tis to be done!'

'He'd steer for Falmouth, I suppose?'

'Plymouth or Falmouth — first port under his lee, or he might fall in with a frigate or an armed sloop, like as not! But 'tis rare to meet with them when they're wanted! They'd see him in.'

'When do you think we shall hear?' the Rector asked, his head bent down, and his eyes on the road that he was prodding with his cane.

'Ay, when? No saying at all. Depends on how much she's crippled and how long he's getting up his jury masts, and the wind and a mort o' things. There's no time at sea, sir. He might be in to-morrow, though it's not what I'd expect. Or he might be a week out, or supposing him driven into the Atlantic — and you may be sure he'd haul off the coast — he may be a fortnight beating up.'

The Rector sighed. 'We must hope for the best,' he said.

Ozias had never met the Rector in this mood before, and he thought to himself that they had not given the devil his due.

'That's it, your reverence,' he agreed heartily. 'And keep up the young lady's spirits. Her man's a man, and I'd give ten pounds o' my own money to see him set foot on Bere-mouth jetty.'

The Rector nodded. 'Thank you, Copestake,' he said. 'Yes, we must keep up our hearts — and hers. You won't, of course, tell her there's any danger?'

'God forbid, sir! No, no! She'll know soon enough, poor thing, if it comes.'

They parted, and the Rector went on. But the jauntiness was gone from his step, and he no longer swung his cane. His face was gloomy with thought. He gazed before him, but he saw, not the things that were in sight, the winding, rutted road, the gorse-clad hill-side, a glimpse of shining sea peeping over a sloping green shoulder. He saw instead Budgen's face as Copestake, blind and undiscerning, had limned it — sullen and hopeless, the face of a man taken in evil, caught in his own net, of a man aware too late of the vengeance that he had called down upon his own head. And with something of the old horror the Rector owned the guilty man his fellow; his fellow not in the crime — God forbid! — but in the retribution, in the judgment that had not yet fallen, but hung ready to fall, and that Budgen by every word he had said, and every look, had owned to be his due!

'O miserable man!' the Rector reflected, his face darkened by his thoughts. 'Taught too late that there is a God that judgeth the world! And am I, too, in the same condemnation? Must I, too, look forward with the same hopelessness, the same certainty of a price to be paid? Must I, too, see the sins of the father visited upon the innocent child?'

He tried to put the thought from his mind. He called reason to his aid. He told himself that nothing was changed, nothing was altered, that things were as they had been when

the news came in and cheered all hearts. He strove to think that the chances were good, the risk, great as it was, inevitable. And he prayed earnestly and humbly, his pride put off. But in vain. A cloud had fallen upon his spirit, and though he walked far along the cliffs, walked until the sea stretched dark below him, and lights shone from the scattered farms that lay to landward, he could not shake off the depression that weighed him down.

What he could do, he did. He sent that night, and within the hour, messengers to Plymouth and to Falmouth, a third even to Portsmouth; bidding them await the event each in his place. And upon all he impressed the same thing with endless repetition. They were to bring the news, good or bad, to him — to him. They were to tell it to no one — to no one at all, until they had seen him. He would remain at home. He would be there at all hours, day and night. He could not say this often enough to them. He lost minutes, he kept the men standing while he repeated the warning again and again.

If he could but stop one cranny against fate !

CHAPTER XXIX

THE fiercer the fire the sooner it burns down. Whatever the reason, the jubilation that for a few hours turned Beremouth crazy and filled the night with raucous choruses did not last. Whether the shortness of its reign was due to reaction, or to the little band of women, who flitted white-faced and tearful from door to door and would not be quieted, or to some word let fall by Ozias in his cups, the last rant of 'Spanish Ladies' had barely died upon a bleak dawn before the little port began first to count the cost of victory and then to doubt the victory itself.

Sober heads of families, men who a few hours before had roared and bragged with the best, became — and all in a moment as it seemed — critical and despondent, sharers in the women's alarm. Gathered before the Keppel Head to take the dram that queasy stomachs demand, or in knots upon the quay where the smell of fishes' heads were least pungent, they fell to asking what news of Bill, and if aught had been heard of Barney; and they got no answer. From this to noting the scantiness of the news and the lack of detail was but a step, and depression set in. Presently a man more clear-sighted than his fellows lifted his voice and in an unhappy moment of vision put the question.

'What if they don't bring 'em in after all?' he asked. 'Have 'ee thought o' that?' 'Taint enough to strip the net. Ye've got to bring the fish in.'

'That's gospel true!'

'Ay, and past Ushant,' an old salt said, shaking his head. 'And that be as plaguy a bit o' sea both for gales and

mounseers as I know anywhere. A right awk'ard bit, surelie !'

'It be ! And her half crippled, as one may say.'

'I wish I see 'em coming in now,' quoth the first speaker darkly. 'But I'm fearing it's a sight ye'll none of ye see. 'Tis too good to be true, mates. How many of a crew do 'ee guess he'll ha' left fit to haul and steer, much more to serve a gun ? And two to sail and two to hold ! He'll never do it !'

'And, you see,' quavered an old man who had not spoken before, 'where there's wounded there's like to be killed. How many ?' He looked at the ground before his feet, his hand shaking on his staff. 'How many ? And who'll we see back ?'

This was too hopeless a view, and one of his fellows objected to it. 'Come, George, that's not like you,' he said uncomfortably. 'No need to scare the women.'

George did not reply, but a silence fell upon the group, and presently it broke up, the older men creeping home, while others turned into the Keppel Head and called for a well-thumbed chart that hung in the parlour and had hung there no man knew how long. This was spread upon a table, and they bent over it, the scholar or two among them marking off distances with their horny thumbs, and muttering of leagues and so on, Penmarch Point and the like. Even these dispersed after a time, but the voices of the women in lane and alley, clamouring for news and threatening visits, now to Budgen and now to the Rector, were not to be silenced. Their voices slowly and inexorably spread gloom through the place.

'Bide home and rest !' men told them testily — but in vain. Who was wounded ? they wanted to know. For it was no new thing that they feared. It was a common end for Beremouth folk, as we know. To sail away with the morning tide, leaving home and babes and straining eyes and sore hearts: and to return no more. To be lost in the mist

of the offing and the mistier beyond, and to be just — gone ! No funeral, no gathering of neighbours, no green mound in churchyard on the Point — only the women for the most part lay under the squat Norman tower — but to be just — missing. It was the fate, sooner or later, of many a strong man in Beremouth. He sailed away, and his leaning-post on the quay knew him no more. The inexorable sea, or the greedy war, had taken him.

Meanwhile, though the women's wailing was not to be stilled, and the sound of their shrill voices drove more than one old salt into hiding, not a woman among them forgot herself so far as to carry her fears to the Cottage. Nor, to do them justice, was it her position as the Rector's daughter that shielded Peggy; it was the charity of sex, and the babe that was coming, and perhaps more than all the whisper that ran round that the young wife in her abounding pride felt no alarm. They pitied her inexperience, but to a woman they respected it. They wondered and in sanguine moments they drew some comfort from her example. Judging her by themselves it did not strike them that she might fear, and not show it; that trained to a higher control she might possess a trembling soul in silence, and that even when panic assailed her and she saw her terror reflected in the Captain's eyes, she might set such a value on her husband's achievement — knowing what it was to him — as lifted her above despair.

Yet that was the case. Peggy did not know the grounds, certainly not all the grounds, there were for fear. But she did fear and did tremble, did suffer in the watches of the night, and suffered more as the hours and the days passed and brought no news, no word of the safety of the brig. But she held panic at bay for her man's sake, she bore herself bravely before the father's eyes, and smiling wanly, talked hopefully, making nothing of her own trial. She told herself that Charles had played his part and she must play hers. And she had fierce proud hours when she thought

of his deed, and her eyes shone and she triumphed in the splendour of it. Hours, when she told herself that at last they knew him as he was, when she saw him on the deck amid the smoke and crash of guns, directing, over-seeing, cool, stern, powder-grimed ! Her man ! Her man ! And again there were sweet moments when she allowed herself to picture his return to the wife and the home that he had ennobled.

But as long days and longer nights passed, and the first flush of the tidings faded, and she saw the old Captain's face grow hourly more care-worn, it was all that she could do to bear up ; to face the morning light when she awoke, and the grey of evening veiling a sad and misty sea, and still to control herself. Her own time was coming, and while she told herself that she would have no fear were he beside her — he did not come. And the news lingered. She had heard that her father had sent out messengers, and that not a moment would be lost in bearing the tidings to her ; and she had blessed him for the thought. But the messengers did not come. Surely the *Lively Peggy* should be in Portsmouth by now ? Or in Falmouth or Plymouth ? Or some vessel should have come in with word of her ! The wind ? Ah, that terrible wind ! Morning by morning she crept out, often half-clad, to a place where she could see the vane on the Church ! Hourly she visited the same place, and still the cruel wind blew from the north and kept him from her.

And then on the sixth day a thing happened that if it did not relieve her anxiety, diverted her thoughts. They were early risers, at the Cottage, it still wanted an hour of nine, and she was languidly clearing the table after their morning meal, when she heard the latch of the gate rattle, and turning, caught sight of someone passing from gate to door. She caught her breath. It seemed an ill-omen, that dark form seen between her and the bright sun, and the rap that followed drove the blood from her cheeks. She clung to the table unable to move. Then — the old man was up-

stairs and she was alone — she collected herself and, trembling, she opened the door.

The visitor was Wignall. He held a newspaper in his hand. 'The Rector sent it, Ma'am,' he said, his manner a tactful mean between deference and sympathy. 'I was to say before I gave it to you, as it's good news, Ma'am.'

The colour rushed to Peggy's face. 'They've come in?' she cried. 'Oh, Wignall, say so! Say they've come in!'

'No, Ma'am, no!' he answered in haste. 'It's not that. But it's — it's all in the paper! Splendid! Grand!' he exclaimed, enthusiasm getting the better of training. 'We're proud — we're proud, miss!'

'Oh!' she said, her voice dropping to a lower key. Her lips quivered. 'Will you — will you thank my father, Wignall? It was kind, very kind of him to send it. And thank you.'

She looked at him so pitifully, that a lump rose in the butler's throat. 'They will be sure to be in — in a day or two, Ma'am,' he said. 'Certain sure! They would be in now, but for the wind. There's no doubt about it, it's the wind, Ma'am, no doubt at all!'

'Yes, Wignall, I — I think so,' Peggy said. But her face was troubled.

He was glad to escape, leaving the journal in her hand. It was the *Exeter and Plymouth Gazette* of the day before, and it had been folded by a careful hand in such a way as to show a marked passage. Yet Peggy held the paper long and did not look at it. She was afraid to look, afraid to know what it contained. The man had told her that the news was good, but good or bad, she shrank from knowing it. That which she held in her hand, that piece of print meant so much to her! At length, after listening to assure herself that the old man was not coming down — for she could suffer no eye to share her first reading — she closed the staircase door. She seated herself at the table, she spread the paper before her. Her heart thumped tumultuously and for

a few seconds she could not see. Then, clasping her head with both hands, she read, the words dancing before her eyes.

Above stairs the Captain had done his simple tasks. He had made his bed, but he was still pottering about, making neatness more neat, when it struck him that the place was very quiet. He heard no movement of feet below, no clatter of plates. Ever anxious on his companion's account — if he could he would have nailed her to a chair — he took fright. Was she ill? Had she fainted? Or could it be that she had gone out? He went to the head of the narrow staircase, he listened, he heard nothing. Wondering and alarmed, he hobbled down the stairs and opened the door.

It was as he had feared. Peggy was seated at the table, her arms cast forward upon it, her face hidden in them. And she was weeping, as if her heart would break.

'Oh, my dear!' he cried, in terror for her, and going to her he touched her tenderly on the shoulder. 'You mustn't! You know that you mustn't. You will do yourself harm!'

'I know — I know I mustn't!' Peggy sobbed. Raising her head she looked at him, her eyes shining through her tears. 'But I am so proud! So proud! Oh, he will be happy! Read it! Read it! See what he has done — my man!'

'But — but for God's sake,' he pleaded anxiously, 'calm yourself. You know it is important, my dear. You will harm yourself!'

'I will,' she sobbed. 'But — but he kept the deck! He kept the deck! Read it!' She turned to him, her tear-stained face radiant, and with trembling hands she pressed the paper upon him.

'Steady, my dear! I will read — see, I am reading,' he conjured her. 'But do, my dear, calm yourself.'

'I will! There — I am quiet now.' She smiled through her tears. 'But read, please read!'

Slowly he adjusted his glasses, and with her glowing eyes upon him he read:

WE are proud to record for the information of our readers that news of an engagement of an uncommon kind and one adding lustre to the annals of our gallant seamen has been received at Portsmouth. The *Betsy Gunn*, out of Alexandria, homeward bound, in ballast from the Straits, arrived off the Pool on Tuesday, having on board six wounded men, part of the crew of the brig, The *Lively Peggy*, privateer of Beremouth, commander, Charles Bligh, which had been in action south of Ushant with the *Intriguante*, a French sloop of war stationed at Brest — and stated to carry 18 guns with a complement of 100 men and boys. A letter forwarded by the Commander of the Privateer to the Port Admiral states that The *Lively Peggy* armed with 8 six-pounders and carrying a crew of 55, was surprised by the *Intriguante* at break of day on the 15th instant, the French ship being sighted off the starboard quarter and not more than two miles to windward. Summoned to surrender the brig held on her course but being pressed backed her foresail and bore up passing under the Frenchman's stern, and raking her, and after a running fight of one hour and fifteen minutes, early in which she had the good fortune to bring down the corvette's main-mast and do much damage to her rigging, she forced her to haul down her flag. The wounded state the loss of the privateer at five killed and nine wounded, the latter including the Commander who was struck on the head by a splinter, but kept the deck. The loss of the *Intriguante* is believed to be fifteen killed and upwards of twenty wounded. Immediately upon the receipt of the letter the Port Admiral visited the men in a hospital and having heard their story forwarded the Commander's letter to the Secretary of the Admiralty, and at the same time ordered a sloop of war to leave Spithead and cruise in search of the brig and her prize, which it is feared are detained by head-winds. We are informed that the Commander of the Privateer, which has so signally distinguished herself, was formerly a Lieutenant in the King's Service, and until lately employed on dockyard service at Plymouth. The corvette which is well known in Brest waters and has done much damage will, if not hulled beyond repair, be purchased by the Admiralty and added to the Service.

At the last moment before going to Press we are enabled to add the Port Admiral's covering Letter which appeared in last night's *London Gazette*.

ADMIRALTY OFFICE

Copy of a letter from the Port Admiral at Portsmouth
to Evan Nepean, Esquire, dated the 14th instant.

SIR,

I have the honour to transmit for their lordships' information a letter sent in this day by Mr. Charles Bligh, Commander of the brig, *The Lively Peggy*, private ship of war armed with eight six-pounders and a swivel, reporting that at 3.45 A. M. on the 15th instant, Ushant bearing north-east nine leagues, he was discovered and chased by the *Intriguante*, Republican sloop of war, mounting 18 six-pounder guns, and after a running fight of one hour and fifteen minutes during which his loss was five killed and nine wounded he compelled the enemy to haul down her colours, and took possession of her.

Immediately upon receipt and having confirmed the contents I ordered the *Gazelle* sloop to put to sea and cruise in search of the brig and prize, the wind continuing northerly and both vessels being I am informed in a crippled condition.

The facts appear to deserve their lordships' particular attention, and I have the honour to be, sir,

Your obedient servant,

JOSHUA FULLALOVE, *Rear Admiral*

GOVERNMENT HOUSE
PORTSMOUTH

'Their particular attention !' Peggy cried, smiling through her happy tears; and taking the paper from the old man she hugged it to her breast. 'Oh, thank God ! He will be reinstated now, I am sure he will be reinstated !'

'God grant it !' the Captain said. He was hardly less moved, hardly more master of himself. 'But you must be calm ! You must control yourself ! For his sake, my dear.'

'I will, I will,' she said. And they mingled their tears.

CHAPTER XXX

IF ACTS exist only as they are shaped by the mind that apprehends them. With a conscience clear as an Egyptian sky, Dr. Portnal would have viewed his son-in-law's achievement from a height. He might have belittled it, he might have patronisingly approved of it. If he had gone so far as to accept it as a sign of grace, he would have done so grudgingly, allowing that anything that lessened the unfortunate *mésalliance* was welcome, and that as his daughter had chosen to marry a scapegrace it was well that he should prove himself a daring scapegrace. The deed that, if done by a post-captain, he would have praised without stint, might have won but a stately word of commendation, when credited to a person without rank and of no importance.

But the Rector's conscience was not at rest, and his feelings having suffered a change, he welcomed with eagerness the opportunity of making amends. He viewed the Lieutenant's achievement from a new and different standpoint. He read with admiration and a full heart the tribute that the paper paid to it, he sent on the paper without a moment's delay to his daughter — what better peace-offering could he send? — and to all whom he met he spoke of the matter with a warmth that implied a certain forgiveness of the past.

Unfortunately this did not exorcise the spectre that haunted him, nor allay the apprehensions that he felt; apprehensions that grew with every hour that saw no return of his messengers, with every day that passed and brought no

news of the brig's safety. That Bligh would be lost at sea, and that the shock of his death would be fatal to Peggy was a presage that he could not shake off. It weighed upon his mind, it shadowed his thoughts, it was with him in his study and at his table.

Nemesis! The word and the thought, once admitted, clung to him like the shirt of Nessus.

Those who met him and had no key to the secret, wondered; finding the man altered, feeling him to be more human, more open, less reticent. 'That poor girl!' he said to Wyke, whom he encountered one morning pacing the churchyard walk, whither the same motive had brought both; a forlorn hope that the *Peggy* would beat up to the home port and that her topsails might in some happy hour break the empty horizon. 'That poor girl!' he repeated with emotion. And Wyke saw with surprise that there were tears in his eyes. 'If bad news comes it will kill her.'

'It must not reach her,' Wyke replied with decision. 'You must see to that, Rector. It must be kept from her until — until after. Then when she is out of danger ——'

'But can we keep it from her?' The Rector spoke despondently. 'Is it possible?'

'Why not? You will be the first to hear it. You must take your precautions.'

'Precautions! I may take them, man, but will they avail?'

'You must see to it that they do avail,' Wyke replied. 'For the matter of that I don't think that there is a man or woman in the place who would tell her — who would break in upon her with the news if they heard it.'

The father sighed. 'I hope it is so,' he said.

Sir Alberty parted from him, puzzled by his gloomy view, and wondering more than ever at the change in him. Later Wyke met Charlotte Bicester and told her what the Rector had said and the effect it had had on his mind.

'The truth is,' Charlotte decided, 'he's right. As long as

there is no one with her, there is a risk. But some one should be with her. Some one who would keep watch and see that the news did not reach her — if it came.'

'But who is there to do it? Her sister?'

Charlotte's face was eloquent. 'Augusta! Pretty cold comfort she'd be! As good as a lump of ice! But there!' She shot a conscious look at him. 'There's my tongue running away again! I suppose I should not have said that.'

'I don't know why you shouldn't.'

'Oh, well, if you don't, I don't. But I don't think she would do at all. I'll tell you what I'll do. I'll see if Peggy will let me go to her.'

'To the cottage? To stay, do you mean?'

'Why not? Isn't that what you want? The Captain can get a bed out. And I could have his room. Her ladyship — Charlotte made a grimace, perhaps to hide her embarrassment, for Sir Albery was looking at her in a very odd way — 'will make a fuss of course. But I can manage her. I could guard the door if I could do nothing else, and I'll answer for it the news would not get past me. I can lie like a trooper when I like,' Charlotte added hurriedly. For Sir Albery was still looking at her in that odd way.

'It's — it's extraordinarily good of you,' he said. 'But I am afraid you will be very uncomfortable there.'

'Why? Because the rooms are not twenty feet square, and the hall is all one with the parlour? What nonsense! I am not made of barley-sugar, and of course Peggy should have a woman with her, and better a friend than a stranger. What should we think of ourselves if anything went wrong with her and — and ——'

'To be sure,' Sir Albery said gravely. 'There is that. And it is but a small thing you are doing after all. Any-one would do it, Miss Bicester, of course.'

'Of course,' Charlotte said, relieved. 'Any friend. I'll see about it to-day.'

'If she'll let you?'

'I shall not give her the choice. I'll bundle out the Captain and bring in my bandbox, and say the thing's done, and can't be undone. She'll be thankful in her heart. Of course she's fretting.'

Wyke had a happy thought. 'I'll tell you what I'll do,' he said. 'I'll take the old chap in at the Manor. And that will suit all parties.'

Charlotte's eyes sparkled so that for a moment she looked almost handsome. 'Will you?' she cried. 'Well, you are a good soul! That will make it all right.'

'You may call it done,' he said. 'But I wish to goodness the news had come and the *Peggy* was in!'

'You don't think well of the delay, then?'

'I don't know what to think,' Wyke confessed. 'But I could see that the Rector was very anxious.'

Charlotte sniffed. 'Aware that he has a daughter at last, is he?' she said. 'Well, I am not sorry that he should be punished a bit! I suppose you know that he went to see her yesterday? Heart-to-heart talk, full forgiveness, a father's blessing and the rest! A bit late! But all the same,' Charlotte added, rubbing her nose thoughtfully, 'I am surprised. I did not think that the man had a heart. It seems that he has!'

'It must have been a great relief to her.'

'Umph! It may have been. But I am afraid that she is taking fright again. You may be sure that she does not like the delay any more than we do, and I don't suppose that the Captain is the brightest of company. However, we will get him away and then ——'

'With an angel in the house?'

Charlotte winced almost as if his words hurt her. 'I look like an angel, don't I?' she retorted. 'A plain angel I should make!' And with a nod and rather abruptly she broke away and went up the street. But as she passed the barber's shop and paused for a word with Dunch — Charlotte had a word for everyone gentle and simple — Dunch

was struck by the brightness of her face. 'It is good for sore eyes to see you, Miss,' he flung after her as she went on. 'If you'd let me curl your hair to rights, for you've plenty of it, you would not be at all ——' Charlotte lost the rest.

However the arrangement at the cottage was not to be made as easily as the pair anticipated. Charlotte broke the plan to Peggy as a settled thing — a thought that had just occurred to her. She had brought her traps with her, she said, and there they were. But Peggy took fright, and for once betraying the alarm that, slowly accumulating, she had as sedulously hidden, she seized Charlotte by the shoulders, turned her to the light, and with fear in her eyes strove to read her face. 'You've bad news?' she exclaimed. 'I know you have! Don't — don't keep it from me! Tell me!'

Charlotte was alarmed by an agitation that she had not expected, but she was equal to the occasion. 'I'll tell you the truth, and that is that you are a little ninny!' she replied. 'I've no news. I know no more than you do, Peggy. What I do know is that you ought to have a woman with you, and I'm the woman; and I'm coming in spite of your teeth, and whether you like it or not. When the man returns he can turn me out if he pleases.'

Peggy drew a long breath and let her hands fall. But she was not wholly reassured. 'You are sure?' she pleaded, her eyes still on the other's face. 'You are telling the truth, Charlotte?'

'My dear, I am not a liar,' Charlotte rejoined — she was a most unscrupulous person when it suited her. 'I've no news and as far as I know there is none. But you ought not to be alone, and you are not going to be alone. I am coming here, and that's my news and all my news.'

Such colour as Peggy had — and it was not much at this stage — returned to her cheeks. 'But there's no room,' she said.

'There's the Captain's room.'

Peggy smiled. 'But you can't share it with him !' she said.

Neither the smile, however, nor her words deceived the other. She saw what a raw edge suspense had put on Peggy's nerves and what fears underlay her self-control. 'Then I'll share yours, my dear,' Charlotte retorted. 'Or — we'll do better. We'll put the Captain out, and I'll have his room. I thought of that, and I've made all the arrangements.'

Peggy opened her eyes. 'But where is he to go ?'

'To go ? Why, to the Manor. Sir Albery has arranged it, and will be delighted to have him. It's all settled, my dear.'

'You good people !' Peggy cried, and she coloured up to her hair. 'You good, good people ! But it's absurd, it's dreadfully absurd, Charlotte. Why should Sir Albery be put out ?'

'Put out ?' Charlotte replied hardily. 'I see no reason why he should be put out at all. When a man has a big house as empty and as useless as that, I don't see what he can do better than entertain the father of the hero. It's human nature, my dear. I never offered to come, and he never felt the want of company until — you see, don't you ? We are all worshippers of the rising sun. Pigs !'

'But, oh, such dear pigs !' Peggy cried, smiling despite herself. 'How I wish ——' she broke off. She studied Charlotte's face, her own a little sly.

'What ?'

'No, I don't think I'll tell you,' Peggy said. 'I might do mischief. But you two will always be my dearest friends. And if he had the sense ——'

'I don't think he is wanting in sense at all !' Charlotte said. But for some reason she blushed.

So the thing was settled. But not in the end quite as the conspirators had proposed. The Captain showed so much terror at the thought of being quartered on the Manor, and his company thrust on the Squire, that a room was taken for him in a neighbouring cottage. The alteration seemed

to be trifling; in their main object, that Charlotte should take possession as soon as possible, the conspirators had succeeded. All the precautions that they could take, or so it seemed, had been taken. But there is nothing so uncertain as human life; from the clearest sky thunderbolts fall, nor can any man say when he lays down his pen or his cigar-holder that his whole existence may not be changed before he takes it up again. The alteration, a mere nothing in itself, was to have its consequences.

For the news when it came at last to the little port lying in a mood of chastened suspense between pride and apprehension, and swept now by one and now by the other — even as by the sunshine or the sleety showers that prevailed at that season — the news stole in after all unperceived. It was there and no man noted it. The common belief was that the Rector's messengers would bring it, and by day eager eyes watched the landward road, by night at the sound of a hoof rattling down the stony street waking ears were lifted from pillows, lights stirred, windows were opened, questions flung forth. Nor was the side of the sea neglected; the advent of a trawler from the westward, much more the appearance of a chance quay-punt from Falmouth drew a crowd to the jetty. Yet with all this the news was in the town for some hours before it was known by anyone.

The only journal taken in the place was the Rector's, and it is certain that on this day as on others he lost not a minute in opening it, in casting his eyes over it, and in assuring himself that it had nothing to tell. It was Wignall who, taking it up in an idle moment, saw the little paragraph, that thrust into a corner at the last moment, meant so much and carried so fatal a significance. Headed Paris, and quoting from the *Moniteur*, it stated baldly and in four lines that the *La Bayonnaise*, twenty gun corvette, St. Domingo to L'Orient, had encountered at sea, forty leagues due west of the Lizard the corvette *Intriguante* in company with a privateer, both

flying English colours, and had brought in the former, and three survivors from the privateer sunk in action.

The paper rustled in the butler's hands. 'My God !' he cried, 'he can't have seen it !'

An hour later, so late in the afternoon that Sir Albery had sat down to his solitary dinner a messenger arrived at the Manor. He brought not the news but an urgent request that Wyke would go to the Rectory. At once Wyke feared the worst. He left his meal half-swallowed, mounted a horse and galloped into Beremouth, only slackening his speed when he reached the first houses, and riding down the street at his usual pace. At the Rectory he was admitted at once.

'Yes, sir, bad !' the butler murmured in reply to his unspoken question — 'Bad, sir, I fear as bad as can be ! He's in 'here, sir !'

The Rector was seated at his table. The lamp had been lighted, and as he raised his head he showed a countenance so pale and so disordered that Wyke was shocked. He gave his visitor no greeting, but thrust the paper which had been lying before him into his hands. He pointed to the paragraph. 'You'll see it there,' he muttered.

Wyke read and mechanically he repeated the butler's cry. 'My God !' he exclaimed. 'That's very bad ! But — but we had ground to fear it, Rector. It was on the cards, you know. And after all he may have survived.'

The Rector shook his head. 'There's small chance of that,' he said. 'He'd be the last to leave.' He added something that Wyke did not quite catch — about a judgment.

'But still there's a hope !' Wyke protested.

'We must keep it from her,' was all that the Rector found to say.

'Certainly. Certainly we must. Is it known ?'

'Not yet. But it must be — very soon.'

'Have you told anyone ?'

'The old man. No one else. He was passing and Wignall called him in and told him before I knew myself. Wignall feared that he might hear it unprepared. He said he would go to his lodging and — and not see her. He would have broken down, for certain.' On that the Rector himself broke down. 'Oh, Lord, why hast Thou ——' he cried, and then he stopped, trembling violently. With more composure, 'We must keep it from her,' he said. 'That is all that can be done now. We must keep it from her.'

'Most certainly.'

'I've thought — what is best. If I go I must see her, and — and I cannot command myself, God forgive me! But Miss Bicester must be warned. She must not leave her for a moment now!' he continued with a gesture of despair. 'Will you see her? You go there and — and Peggy will not suspect you.'

Wyke hesitated. 'I see great difficulties,' he said. 'There is but the one room, and ——'

The Rector moved impatiently. 'You must call her out,' he said. 'You must get her alone for a minute. She must be warned. She must be warned.'

'But that will of itself alarm Mrs. Bligh.'

'You must make some excuse — any excuse! You can — you can think of something.' The Rector was plainly at the end of his strength. 'Only we must lose no time. We must lose no time.'

Wyke nodded. 'Very well,' he said reluctantly, 'I will go.' But he said it with a heavy heart. It was a terrible responsibility that he was taking, and he did not see his way.

CHAPTER XXXI

THE RECTOR'S study looked upon the walled lawn and was lighted by a heavily mullioned window. Day faded early in it, and Wyke, passing from the lamp-lit room into the open spaces of the churchyard, was surprised to find the twilight still lingering, and the sky, cleared by the north wind, shining blue above the church tower — a blue that faded to green where it met the sea. He owned the pensive influence of the evening hour, but the uppermost feeling in his mind was not so much depression as anxiety. He dreaded the ordeal before him. He felt the weight of his responsibility, he measured with alarm the cost of failure. He foresaw that he must meet the young wife, and that if by slip or any mishap he betrayed his knowledge it was impossible to say what the issue might be. The Rector's despair, surprising in a man so cold and self-contained, had infected him; and as he crossed the churchyard he shivered, picturing Peggy's stricken face should his bearing or a chance word betray the truth.

But it had to be done ! More than once he told himself that as he left the churchyard behind him. At all costs the thing must be kept from Peggy until her child was born; with that end in view no means seemed to him to be unwarranted, no precaution excessive. And while he trembled with one half of his mind at the prospect before him, with the other half he sought for a plausible pretext on which he might get Charlotte Bicester alone.

With the Cottage in sight he hit on one, and it was with a little more confidence that he opened the wicket. He

saw that an upstairs window was lighted, and he rapped softly, hoping that Charlotte might be alone and below. He heard an exclamation, he caught the sound of a chair as it was moved back, the door opened. It was Charlotte — to his great relief — who appeared.

'Sir Albery !' she exclaimed. Then over her shoulder, 'It's Sir Albery, dear,' she said.

That put an end to his hope, but not to his plan. 'Is Mrs. Bligh there ?' he asked, his tone as careless as he could make it.

'She wouldn't be anywhere else at this hour !' Charlotte said. The question surprised her.

'Can you leave her for a minute ?' He spoke loud enough to be heard within. 'I'm afraid you are in trouble. I'm sorry, but your mother is here.'

'My mother ? Oh dear !'

'Yes, and I fear on the war-path. She is in the carriage in the churchyard. It is a question of some dinner-party and to tell you the truth, I am afraid that she's in a tantrum, Miss Bicester, and won't go till she sees you.'

'Well, I can't come,' Charlotte replied. She was completely deceived. 'And you must tell her so.'

His eyes strove to convey a warning. He could see that the tea-table was set, but the open door concealed Peggy from him. 'I am afraid you must come,' he said with a laugh.

'Of course you must, Charlotte,' Peggy cried. He heard her rise and he trembled. She came to the door, and stood behind Charlotte. 'Of course she'll come, Sir Albery. Does she think that I can't be left for a minute ?'

'I came for her very unwillingly,' he explained.

'There's no news, I suppose ?' Peggy's eyes were wistful.

'No,' he said cheerfully — and the more cheerfully as he was shocked by the change that suspense had wrought in her within the last few days. Her face was drawn and haggard,

and fatigue had set black prints under her eyes. 'I don't expect it, Mrs. Bligh, as long as the wind stays where it is. A change, and in forty-eight hours I shall hope to hear that they are in.'

She looked at him pitifully. 'I must be patient,' she said, but her words seemed to come from the depths of an over-charged heart. 'I so much hoped that he would be at home before ——'

'And so he will, my dear,' Charlotte said lightly. 'And he will be uncommonly in the way too — as my lady mother is now.'

'Pon honour you must not keep her waiting,' Wyke urged, playing his part. 'She is not in the best of tempers, Miss Bicester, to tell you the truth. I fear you must come. You can be back in ten minutes, if she is not too much for you.'

The undutiful daughter turned away. 'I am not afraid of that,' she said. 'Wait till I get my hat.'

'Put on something, dear,' Peggy murmured.

'I shall not stay long enough to want it.'

'But if she really needs you?'

'She won't get me!' Charlotte retorted. 'Mothers must not cry for the moon! And my mother is just as likely to get me as the moon!'

'But, Charlotte ——'

'Do you sit down in your chair, my dear! And this moment if you please, or I don't go at all. I don't go a yard until I see you in your chair again!'

She was putting on her hat while she talked. 'Now, Sir Albery,' she said, 'I'm ready to face the dragon! I expect it is Augusta who has put her up to it. Now, don't you stir a foot until I come back, Peggy, or I'll scold you worse than my mother scolds me!'

She nodded gaily and joined Sir Albery outside. He closed the door and they passed through the gate, and up the

path, the sea, pale under the fading light, lying below them on their right. She turned her eyes on him. 'Is my mother really there?'

'No, but we must go a little farther before we speak. No, she is not there, but there is bad news — very bad! — and I had to have a word with you. The Rector thought that you should hear it that you may be more on your guard.'

Charlotte clapped her hands. 'Bad news?' she cried. 'Oh dear, dear! Oh dear, dear!' she wailed. 'It will kill Peggy! It will kill her if she hears it!'

'She must not hear it,' Wyke replied, and he told her in a few words what was known. Charlotte listened, and did not interrupt him, but Wyke saw that her face was very grave. 'Oh dear!' she said when he had finished. 'I would give a hand that this had not happened! Oh, it is cruel! Cruel! It will kill her, Sir Albery! She will never get through her trouble with this — with this!' There were tears in her eyes.

'She must not know it,' Wyke said, as they emerged from the path and turned towards the walk that looked down on the sea. 'She must not know it,' he repeated firmly. 'You must be on the watch night and day to keep it from her. The Rector will see the doctor and nurse, and prepare them. And no one will be in a hurry to tell her. The danger, the only danger, I think, is that someone, who takes it for granted that she knows, may have speech with her. And surely you can guard against that?'

'I don't know! I don't know!' Charlotte cried. 'And how long — how long can we keep it from her?'

'Long enough, I hope,' he said. 'And after all it is not a certainty that Bligh is lost. He may have shifted to the prize, or he may be one of the three who have been saved.'

'Three!' Charlotte exclaimed in a tone of despair. 'No, I've no hope. I know from her what he is and he would not spare himself! If she knows what we know she will have no hope.'

'Still there is a chance. And the child once born she will cling to it and live.'

Charlotte broke down altogether. 'Poor Peggy!' she sobbed. 'Poor, poor Peggy! She gave up everything for him! Oh, it is too hard! It is too hard! And—I am afraid! How shall I face her?'

'It's a dreadful thing to put on you!' he said, and his tone said more than his words. The ordeal that had seemed to him so formidable this girl must endure hour after hour, and it might be for days. 'I cannot think how you will bear it,' he continued with feeling. 'I would give the world to help you, but I cannot.'

She dabbed her eyes. 'I must bear it,' she said, 'I should be a poor creature to call myself her friend and—fail her now.'

Sir Albergy took a step forward. 'A poor creature!' he exclaimed. 'My dear, I think you are——' and then the clock in the old tower above them tolled the first solemn stroke of six, and Charlotte took fright and cut him short. 'Heavens!' she cried; 'I must get back! We've been out twenty minutes. Don't speak, don't speak another word! I must think what I will say to her.'

He saw the need of haste, and he turned with her. They hurried back down the steep steps and along the path. Her mind was full of the trial before her, and he respected her silence. Neither spoke until they reached the wicket. There he wrung the girl's hand. 'God bless you,' he said earnestly. 'I would do it for you, if I could.'

'But you can't!' Charlotte retorted. She dried her eyes with care. 'There, never mind, I am a good liar and I must do my best!'

He saw her enter, he knew that he could do no more, and, anxious as he was, he thought of his uneaten dinner, and he retraced his steps. Near the foot of the church tower he came in the dusk upon the sexton who was locking up the church. The man touched his hat—it was light

enough for them to recognise one another — and after a momentary hesitation the man joined him. 'Be this news true, your honour?' he asked in a low voice. 'It be woeful tidings if it be.'

Sir Albergy was startled; he was more than startled, he was dismayed. How had the news got about? He had taken for granted that the Rector would keep it to himself as long as he could — till the morrow at earliest; and he was surprised that he had not. 'What news?' he asked warily. 'What news do you mean, Trewithen?'

'Well, 'twas the Captain that told me!' the man replied, turning his hat in his hands. 'Leastways he let a word or two fall, your honour, and, 'twas easy to guess the rest. But he wasn't just what you'd call himself. He had had a drop, saving your presence but, Lord's sake, not as much as I've often ——'

'Do you mean Captain Bligh?'

'To be sure, sir, the old gentleman. He went by me not ten minutes ago, or it might be a quarter at most.'

'He had been drinking?' Wyke stopped — the two had walked a score of paces together. 'Are you sure, man?'

Challenged, Trewithen, it was clear, felt himself in something of a hobble. He hastened to clear himself. 'I'd be loth to say it, if it wasn't so, sir,' he said. 'Deed I would! He's a kep off so long it's been an admiration! But a bit o' bad news — and bad it be and no mistaking, if it be true — well, there's nothing like it for sending a man to his comforts.'

Wyke stared at him. 'What did he tell you?' he asked.

'As the Frenchies had took and sunk 'em to the last man a'most! Terrible bad it was, he said, and his son killed on the quarter-deck! And him a wretched childless old man! And the sooner he was ——'

A certain fear gripped Wyke. He seized the sexton by the shoulder and turned him about. 'Which way did he go?' he cried. 'Which way, man?'

'Way?' Trewithen, surprised, pointed in the direction from which Wyke had come. 'Down to Israel Bean's he was going, your honour, to be sure. He bides there in the Cove till the young lady's trouble be over. Dear life, 'twill be sad news for her, if it be true!'

Wyke heaved a sigh of relief. He had had a moment of great fear. 'Well, I've heard something of it, Trewithen,' he said, collecting himself. 'Whether it's true, I can't say, and we'll hope it is not. It is sure to be exaggerated. But, true or false, don't put it about, man, till we hear more. D'you hear? And keep a still tongue about the Captain. It's a sad time for him and I'm not surprised.'

The sexton agreed that the Captain's back-sliding was natural and promised to be silent, and Wyke, parting from him, turned into the Rectory. He found the Rector in his study, seated as he had left him, and he made his report. He thought it wise to say nothing of the Captain's lapse. It was useless to set the other against him, and it might well be that by morning the old man would have slept off his drink, and no more would be heard of it. Instead, when he had finished his tale, 'I think that is all we can do, Rector,' he said. 'We have made all as safe as we can.' Then, remembering that the news was known and would probably spread, 'There's one man I think we ought to tell,' he said. 'Or he may hear it elsewhere and make trouble.'

The Rector had not risen. He sat with his shoulder towards the door, and grateful as he was to the other, and though in very truth he was telling himself that Wyke was such a friend as few had, it was much if he had once glanced at him. He did not turn now, and his tone was dry as he asked 'Who? Who is it we ought to tell? Surely the fewer who know this the better.'

'Well, I thought, Budgen.'

The exclamation that burst from the other's lips was so violent that it drove Wyke a step back. The Rector rose

to his feet and his manner was as wild as his word. 'Don't name that man to me,' he said, 'lest I curse him! He is the murderer of my child! He is the murderer of — who shall say? Who shall say? Keep him — keep him from my sight! Or the curse ——'

He broke off. He passed his trembling hand across his brow, and as Wyke, really fearing that the news had turned his brain, stared at him, he came back to himself. He sank into his chair and covered his face. 'God forgive me!' he said in a voice that strangely troubled the other. 'God forgive us all! I think I am going mad!'

Wyke put his friendly hand on his shoulder. 'You must not take it like this,' he said. 'You take it too hardly, Rector. We must think of others, and ——'

'Others?' The Rector groaned. 'Am I not thinking of them — thinking of them always? Thinking of them now! Wyke, I am an unhappy man.'

'Come, come,' Wyke replied, the need to bring the other to a saner mind overcoming his reserve. 'This must not be, my friend. The news has been too much for you, and I don't wonder. But you must not give way. We must make the best of a bad job and hope that the loss has been exaggerated. Most likely it has. Bligh may not be lost. If in the *Peggy*, he may be one of the survivors, or he may have shifted to the prize. It is quite likely.'

The Rector with his face hidden made a sign of dissent. He muttered something in a low voice, but all that Wyke could catch were the words 'the sins of the fathers,' and something about a Nemesis — it sounded like that, but he could not piece the fragments.

Still he was relieved to see that the man's passion was spent, and 'You must cheer up' he repeated earnestly, 'and not give up hope. I must go now — we have done all that we can to make things safe. I am sure that we can depend on Miss Bicester, she is one in a thousand. But I will ride in early in the morning. I may be of use with some of the poor

souls in the town, and anything I can do — but for God's sake take comfort, my friend.'

The Rector put out a hand, and Wyke pressed it and left him. As he mounted his horse, however, and still more as he rode down the winding road from the headland to the town, the sense of tragedy, of something worse than he knew, weighed on him. He considered, at any rate until lately he had considered, the Rector to be a just man, but hard, cold and something selfish. How great, then, must be the suffering that had moved such a man, and wrung from him that bitter cry! To be sure the disaster was grave, and it was natural that they who were responsible for it, who had risked men's lives for their own gain, should be shocked by the outcome. But after all these ventures were common. No man condemned them. Out of the greater ports, out of Bristol and Liverpool letters of marque sailed by the score; to raid the enemy's trade was held to be a patriotic as well as a legitimate business, and if ship or men were lost it was but one of the reckoned perils of the war. Wyke weighed this, and wondered the more. Certainly, on his daughter's account the man might — and it was natural that he should — take the matter to heart; but the extent to which he felt it, the sharp cry that it had wrung from him, these perplexed Wyke as much as they oppressed him.

His mood was not lightened by a thing that befel him as he rode up the dark narrow street, his horse's hoofs rattling noisily on the stones. He had passed Dunch's pole, when a woman, a shawl about her head, came out of a doorway and seized his rein. 'For God's sake,' she cried, looking up at him; 'tell me if it be true! For mercy's sake, sir, and you be held a good man to the poor, put us out of our misery and tell us!'

'It's Jael Cruddas, isn't it?' he said. He knew every creature in the place, and he only put the question to gain time.

'Ay, ay, sir!' the woman replied. 'And my man be

aboard ! Only tell us, sir ! Tell us ! My George be there, and we parted cross and wi' hard words — I would not have him go ! And we'll never make it up now ! Never ! Never !' she cried wildly. 'Oh, sir, as you be a kind man, tell me, is there a chance ?'

'I think there is, Jael !' he said. 'For some at least. Some we know are saved. But how many I don't know, and no one does know yet ! But some are saved for certain, and your George may be one. Half, and God grant it may be more — half may come back, I hope.'

She peered into his face, trying to read it by the light that shone from a neighbouring doorway. 'God bless you for that word !' she sobbed. 'You do mean it, sir ? You are not deceiving me ?'

'I do mean it,' Wyke said gravely. 'I've told you all I know myself. And the moment I know more I will come and tell you. It's a sad business, but we must keep up our hearts.'

'And the poor young lady ?' the woman asked, speaking more quietly, but with a sob in her voice. 'Is it true that her man's killed, sir ? They be saying that.'

'We don't know,' Wyke answered sorrowfully. 'But I am afraid his chance would not be of the best.'

'God help her, then ! Does she know, sir ?'

'Not yet. And she must not know.'

'No, sir, no ! It'd be a hard heart that'd tell her.'

'You may be sure, Jael,' Wyke said, 'that you will not be forgotten. We are all one in this.' He rode on.

But his heart was heavy. He had forgotten his half-eaten dinner. His mind was full of the sorrow that on either hand wept behind closed doors, on cold hearths. And his house when he reached it seemed to him empty and desolate. He sat down to his meal, feeling the lack of a face to welcome him, of a word to greet him, of someone to whom he could tell his tale, who would listen and answer and comfort him. The table looked long and bare and cold; the silence of the house

depressed him as it had never depesed him before. He told himself that the disaster had shaken him, that he sorrowed for the young wife, and her loss, for Jael and the rest. But presently he fell into another and a more cheerful train of thought — in which the Cottage and its inmates, or one of them, had still a large share.

CHAPTER XXXII

IN WYKE'S attitude to those about him there survived much of the feudal spirit. He looked on them as his people, and while he would have been shocked if the man on the road had not touched his hat when he passed, or the woman he met failed to curtsy, he owned on the other hand their claim to his support at a pinch and their right to find in him a sharer in their troubles. He did not flatter himself that his presence brought much comfort to a cold hearth, or cheer to a widowed home. But he knew that a word of sympathy from his mouth, and where it was needed a promise of help, would lighten the sense of abandonment, and though the morrow's task promised to be sad enough, it was a duty that he had no intention of evading. He had business on a distant farm in the forenoon, but that settled — and not without some sharp words about a fence — he turned his horse's head towards the town.

As he approached the Grange his mind strayed from his immediate business. He recalled the morning now nearly a year past when Charlotte Bicester had stopped him at the white gate and broken to him the news of Peggy's elopement. The scene rose clear before him, the sunshine, the freshness of the morning, the waiting girl, the dull shock deadening all his faculties. Perhaps the memory was the more vivid as on this day too the sun shone, and when he turned his eyes on the gate at the Grange he perceived a figure leaning on it, precisely as Charlotte had leant that morning. But this time it was not Charlotte. It was her mother. As, perforce, he slackened his pace to greet her

she opened the gate and came out to him, and he noticed that the good lady looked unlike herself. Her face was flushed, her toupet was disordered, and knowing her he prepared himself for a scolding. He was going to hear more about her daughter's obstinacy and undutifulness. But he found that he was mistaken. 'This is sad news,' she said, looking up at him, and he was astonished to see that her eyes were moist. 'I suppose you have heard it? You are going there, no doubt?'

'Yes,' he said, relieved. 'I was at the Rectory yesterday and I heard it there, late in the afternoon. I'm afraid that it is sad news for a good many.'

'Oh, but ——' She looked hard at him and hesitated. 'But it wasn't known in the afternoon, was it? It could not have been. Or I haven't got it right. I understand that it didn't happen till the evening, or to be sure, this morning. My cook told me ——'

'I think the Rector kept it to himself,' he explained. 'For a time you know. He did not wish to spread it abroad, Lady Bicester, until it was confirmed. It may not be true, you know. We must hope that it is not true.'

The good woman stared. 'But — but there's some mistake!' she said. 'I'm afraid you haven't heard. Mrs. Bligh ——'

He did not need to be told more! He knew the rest, and yet he had to be certain. 'What — what of her?' he said. 'What do you mean? Tell me, please!'

'Then you haven't heard. Oh dear, dear, I am afraid it will be a shock to you. It's bad news, very bad. The old Captain told her what was in the paper — that old man, you know! He wasn't himself, and did not know what he was doing. And her baby was born dead, at three this morning. And she's dying, I am told! They've no hope they tell me.' Her ladyship broke down and actually shed vulgar tears. 'Oh, dear, dear, it's sad!' she said. 'I declare it's upset me as never was.'

Wyke did not speak for a long minute. Lady Bicester, recounting it afterwards to her cook, said that he took it very oddly. At last, 'At what time did you say it happened?' he asked in a dull tone. 'What time did he tell her?'

'About six, I hear. Charlotte, silly girl, had stepped out for something and the Captain came in fuddled with drink. And whether he just blurted it out, which I can't believe, or being in that state couldn't hide it, I am sure I can't say. But so it was — drat him! I declare I am glad now that Charlotte went to her and stopped, though it provoked me at the time, and little use it has been! I've sent a man in to get news, but if you will stop as you come out, it will be a kindness to me. I am that upset about the poor girl I can't say!'

'I will,' he said. 'I'll go on now.'

He gave his horse the rein, but his heart was very heavy. So this — this was the end of all their care and all their forethought. Of their plans and their precautions, of Charlotte's devotion and unselfishness. To die so young and fair, and pass away, life hardly tasted! To lie, another green mound in the churchyard, and presently, quickly to be forgotten, while the sun shone and the meadows bloomed and the lambs frisked, and the seasons moved in their eternal pitiless round! He had great powers of self-control, but the tears rose to his eyes as he pictured her. How gaily she had taken her troubles, how unselfishly faced the narrow home, the hardships and discomfort! How bravely confronted, alone as she was, the ordeal before her! How loyal had she been through all to the lot she had chosen, how loving, how uncomplaining! And this was the end.

He stabled his horse, and with his hat drawn over his eyes he made his way over the headland. Some hundred yards short of the Cottage he met the doctor climbing up the steps, and he stopped him. 'Is there any hope?' he asked.

'None, I fear,' the other replied, his face worried and down-

cast. 'The news killed her as surely as if the old man had taken a pistol and shot her.'

'It was that?'

'Nothing else, God forgive him. Nothing else at all. She was going on well; famously, considering everything. It's a sad business.' The man was moved out of his professional calm. He added viciously that the Captain ought to be shot.

'And after all — the news may not be true,' Wyke said. 'He may not be dead.'

'The Lieutenant? No, I suppose not. I suppose there's a chance, though a small one. But it won't help her now.' He shrugged his shoulders. 'I can do no more.'

'She is sinking?'

'Fast, I am afraid.'

'And there is nothing to be done?'

'Nothing, sir — in my experience. Nothing if you had all the faculty here. Unless,' he added drily, 'you can bring her husband back within the next twenty-four hours. The truth is, she has no desire to live. And that's the very deuce in these cases.'

Sir Albery nodded. But when the doctor had passed on, he halted. He turned about as if he had a mind to call him back. Then he thought better of it, and after standing a minute, lost in gloomy reflection, he went on. Near the Cottage he saw a group of women staring at it in pity or in curiosity, or it might be in morbid interest. But he went by them without speaking, opened the wicket, and knocked softly at the door.

It opened without sound, and he stepped in. Two women were busy about something on the hearth. They turned to look at him, the nearer of the two still holding a kettle in her hand. The room betrayed in its every part the signs of disaster that in sudden calamity so quickly accumulate. The table was littered with pots and plates, a horse hung with linen flanked the hearth, a woman's bonnet hung on a corner

of it, a warming-pan, hastily set down, leant against a wall. The woman who had opened to him made a sign to him to make no noise.

'Who is with her?' he asked in a whisper.

'Mrs. Ovens, the nurse, sir, and Miss Bicester — God bless her, she've never left her. The Rector's been and gone, been twice he has, but he couldn't bear it, poor gentleman. I never thought to see him take on the like,' the woman added, with meaning. 'And Miss Portnal — she were with him. She took him home. They could do nothing, poor folk, no more than we.'

'Can you get Miss Bicester down for a minute?' The woman hesitated, but 'Tell her I am here,' he urged. 'I must see her.'

She gave way. She stepped to the door of the staircase and creaked her way up. In the silence he heard Charlotte move across the floor, he heard her begin to descend. She appeared at the foot of the stairs, her face pale but composed. Silently he made a sign to her to go before him, and he opened the door for her and followed her out. When they had passed through the wicket, he took her hand. 'Is there no hope?' he asked.

'None, I fear,' she murmured. 'She is weak, oh, so weak!' And then with an appealing look at him, 'Don't upset me!' she said.

'No! No!' he muttered, releasing her hand. 'God bless you Charlotte!' With that he was silent a moment, mastering his feelings. Then 'Can she read?' he asked.

Charlotte winced. It was so incongruous a question to ask, and it was put so abruptly that it was no wonder that it startled her. 'Read?' she exclaimed. 'Oh, no, no! You don't understand — how weak she is!' Her voice expressed something of the woman's contempt for the man, astray and out of his province. 'She lies with her eyes shut and — and breathes, that is all.' She had to swallow down the sob

that threatened her self-control. Read? Heavens! if he could see her!

'But she can understand? She can understand — what you say?'

'It is much if she does. I don't know. Sometimes I think — with an effort.'

'Is there a paper in the house? A newspaper?'

Charlotte looked at him in grieved surprise. What had taken him, sober and sensible as he was! As well might he ask at such a moment if there was a chess-board or a hammer in the house! 'What do you mean?' she ejaculated.

'But is there one? A newspaper?'

'I dare say. Yes, there is, I know. But — but what about it?' She stared at him.

'Can you get it? Can you get it for me?'

'Why?' she objected. Had the shock been too much for him? She could not otherwise explain a request so ill-timed.

'Never mind why!' he retorted with an impatience equal to her own. 'Get it for me. For God's sake,' he added seeing that she hesitated, and was going to speak, 'don't waste time. I am going up to her. I am going to see her.'

'You?'

'Yes, I! Why not? Oh, for heaven's sake, let us have no conventions now!' he cried. 'I want to try something. They say that there is no hope; then I can do no harm. I shall not make matters worse. But I must see her. Get me the newspaper,' he repeated insistently, 'and take me up to her before it is too late. It is a forlorn hope, I know, but it is a hope.'

She caught a glimmering of his purpose, and as she met his eyes the glimmer grew brighter. She stared at him with parted lips. 'You — you really mean?' she breathed. 'You dare?'

He nodded. 'Let me have the newspaper,' he said, his face

set hard. 'And leave the rest to me. On my head be it. If we can gain a day, or two or three days, who can say what the end may be? But we must be quick! We must be quick!'

She looked at him with dilated eyes, and in that look — but his thoughts were elsewhere — she let much of her feelings appear. 'Oh!' she said, 'who would have thought of it but you? Who would have — but come! Come, then.'

She went back into the house, and he followed. The women, looking over their shoulders, watched them curiously, their wonder aroused. Charlotte opened a drawer, took from it an old journal. She handed it to him. At the foot of the stairs, the women still gazing at them, but now in amazement, Charlotte paused. 'Have you thought what you will say?' she whispered, her eyes troubled.

He nodded. She signed to him to step softly and she went up the narrow stairs before him. She opened a door. The lintel was so low that he had to bend his head to enter the room. He raised his eyes and the first thing that met his gaze was one that he had not taken into his calculations. On a low box, in a corner where the sloping roof was lowest, cowered the old Captain. The unhappy man was rocking himself to and fro, his face in his hands, and at the sight of his dumb agony, and still more at the thought of what the wretched father's feelings must be, Wyke's heart that had been hard against him, melted in pity. But then, and before indeed the change had well made itself felt, Wyke forgot the old man and all things save the still white face that lay upon the pillow, already, as it seemed to him, lifeless — so solemn and yet so wondrously fair and young it looked. Peggy's hair had been gathered into two thick coils that strayed one on each side of her head, and one hand, as white as her face, lay nerveless on the coverlet. Her eyes were closed. Wyke could not see that she breathed.

At that sight, so far exceeding that for which he had prepared himself, the courage that had been strong below, failed

him. He stood, not venturing to approach. To break in upon that white tranquillity, that silent presence, that even now seemed to be not of this world, that had nothing any longer to hope or fear, and upon which death had already set its stamp — it seemed a sacrilege, an act beyond his power, profane, unfitting. To lie to her ! To deceive her, who had already passed into the palace of truth ! To play in this still chamber the gross drama that he had conceived ! He felt too late that he could not, that he had not the heart to do it, nor the strength. The man stood shaken, dismayed, dumb.

It was the woman who at the critical moment stood firm. She passed by him to the bedside. ‘Peggy,’ she said, her voice low but clear. ‘There is good news, dear. Do you hear, dear ? Sir Albery is here, and he brings news, good news.’

He still hesitated, owning the ordeal to be too great for him. But Charlotte looked at him reproachfully and he went forward. He knelt beside the bed to bring his mouth nearer to Peggy’s ear — but was it not also the fitting posture ? ‘Mrs. Bligh,’ he said huskily. ‘There is news.’ Then drawing courage from desperation he raised his voice, and in a fuller tone, ‘Do you hear, Mrs. Bligh ?’ he continued. ‘Do you hear me ? There is news, and it is good, good news. The best of news ! Your husband is wounded and a prisoner, but he is alive — alive and safe ! I bring the news. Do you hear me ? He is alive !’

Peggy’s eyelids quivered, as a butterfly’s wings quiver invisibly in the sunshine. Her eyes opened, and met his eyes. The coverlet moved above her breast.

‘Again ! Again !’ Charlotte muttered, and in the agony of excitement mingled with hope she clutched Wyke’s shoulder and he felt her fingers digging into his flesh. The nurse on the farther side of the bed had risen to her feet, and was looking on with startled eyes.

The perspiration stood on Wyke’s brow, but he had gone

too far to retreat. It seemed to him that he was wrestling for his life. 'Do you understand?' he cried. 'Good news has come! Your husband is alive, Mrs. Bligh! Your husband is alive, alive! The news is here — here in the newspaper! It is in the newspaper!' he repeated, striving desperately to reach the consciousness that seemed to be so distant, so ready to take its leave. He doubted if she heard or, hearing, understood, but 'He is safe! He is alive!' he repeated insistently. 'He will be here! You must live! You must live for him! He is coming home and he will be here!' The cry came from him again and again, 'He is alive!' For presently he fancied that he saw in her tired eyes a spark of returning life, an awakening.

'He is alive! He will be here!' He repeated it in a very agony of earnestness. If he could only reach her! If he could only reach her, reach through to her on that strange borderland where she lay between life and death. 'You must live!'

She was breathing more quickly; yes, for certain she was breathing more quickly. He saw the nurse on the other side of the bed stoop and look closely at her. He saw the coverlet move and stir above her breast — or was he dizzy with excitement, and let his fancy deceive him? Yes, her hand moved, weakly, but as if she had the will to raise it. Her eyes dwelt solemnly on him, and suddenly there flashed into them a gleam of consciousness, of joy. Her lips parted, and though no one caught the word that they failed to frame, they knew that it was 'Alive?'

'Yes, alive, alive, indeed!' he swore. 'And coming home! It is here, here, in the paper! It is in the paper here!' He held it up for her to see. He tapped it again and again, the sheet rustling in his unsteady hand.

Her eyes moved slowly from him. They dwelt on Charlotte; and now the question in them was clear. 'Yes,' Charlotte said, her voice trembling with emotion. 'Yes, dear, yes! Sir Albery has brought the news. It is in the paper.'

Peggy, dear, dear Peggy, you must live — you must live for his sake ! For his sake, for your husband ! He lives !

She had got it now. They all saw it and were convinced of it. She understood. She closed her eyes and slowly two tears welled from them. 'Thank God !' she breathed, and this time they caught the words, faint as they were. Presently she opened her eyes again. They met Charlotte's. 'He is alive ?' she whispered.

'Yes, dear, alive,' Charlotte said, lying firmly. 'In a few days he will be here. He will be by your bed, Peggy.'

It was Charlotte, too, who with a woman's wit interpreted the weak movement of the hand, the slow change in the direction of the eyes; who took the paper from Wyke's shaking hand and laid it on Peggy's breast, and placed her nerveless hand upon it. The man doubted if he could have done it.

A dawning smile brightened for a moment the white face. Peggy heaved a faint sigh as of infinite satisfaction. She closed her eyes.

Wyke's heart sank, for he thought that they had failed. He thought that they had ventured all for nothing. But Charlotte's hand found his hand, and 'Come !' she whispered. 'Come !' He rose to his feet, and obeying her gesture, he crept after her out of the room and down the stairs. The women below, huddled about the hearth, gazed at them, marvelling — probably they had heard through the raftered floor what had passed. But neither Wyke nor Charlotte heeded them. He was as one who had run a race, or come through some tremendous struggle. He wiped the moisture from his forehead, and turned weakly to the girl. 'Have we failed ?' he muttered — and how naturally he turned to her ! She had been the stronger, it was she who had done it all. But for her he would not at the last moment have dared to utter the lie. 'Have we failed ?' he repeated huskily.

'I don't know ! I don't know !' she said. 'I think not ! I think there's a chance. It's — it's in God's hands now !'

And with a suddenness that shocked him she sat down at the table and, dropping her face on her arms, burst into a passion of weeping. She who had been so strong above!

'Oh, my dear! My dear!' he cried, and careless of the eyes that watched him he put his arm about her shoulder. 'Don't! Don't!' he prayed.

She shook her shoulders, as much as to say, 'Let me be!'

He was waiting for her to recover, all the man in him longing to comfort her, and to tell her what he thought of her, when a hand clutched his arm, and he turned, impatient of interruption. In a second he fell from the clouds. With horror he saw that a fresh trouble awaited them, and that he had not foreseen all the consequences of his act.

For the Captain had crept down after them, and as Wyke turned the old man's grasp shifted from his arm to his breast. He clutched Wyke's coat, and with all his feeble strength he tried to shake him. 'Is it true?' he gasped, his voice whistling in the ecstasy of his hope, his face haggard and distorted. A lock of grey hair had fallen across his forehead, and added to the wildness of his look. 'Is it true? Is it true?' he panted.

Wyke collected himself as well as he could. He must not shock the old man if it could be helped. 'Silence, sir, silence!' he said. 'For heaven's sake compose yourself. We must make no noise. True? I don't know! I don't know! It may be true! But I don't know.'

'Then you — you've heard — you've heard nothing?' the Captain stammered. But there was still hope, a desperate hope in his eyes. He clung to it, it was all that he had to save him from the horror of self-reproach that made his thoughts a hell.

'No,' Wyke said reluctantly. 'No. I've heard nothing. But it may be true. We don't know.'

The Captain's hands fell. The light died out of his eyes. 'Then why — why,' he whispered, 'why did you ——'

'To save her. To save her, man, if it be possible.'

A bitter cry burst from the wretched father, and 'Water Water !' Wyke exclaimed. For the shock had been too much for the Captain. He collapsed, and but for the arm the other passed hastily round him the old man would have fallen to the floor.

'Lay him down !' Charlotte said, wiping away her tears. 'Flat ! Flat !'

CHAPTER XXXIII

AUGUSTA took a strong view of the matter. 'I cannot think it was right,' she said. 'After all the truth is the truth, my dear.'

'And I wouldn't give a fig for it — out of place !' Charlotte replied. 'For all we know it may be the truth. And if it were the biggest lie I ever told in my life, and that would not be a little one, I'd tell it again and thank you !'

'But I thought,' Augusta objected placidly, 'that it was Sir Albery who told it, Charlotte. I can understand him.'

'Oh, my dear, you flatter me ! Gracious goodness, why should Sir Albery be less truthful than I am, I'd like to know !'

Augusta bent over her work. The two girls were in the drawing-room at the Rectory, and through the three tall windows the sunshine of a late spring day was pouring, discovering here and there the faded patch on chair or carpet that wear and a respectable antiquity had wrought. Lady Bicester would not have put up with them, but Augusta knew better, and the room justified her. 'Because I can see Sir Albery's interest in it,' she rejoined. 'While I can not see yours, Charlotte.'

'I don't see that he had more interest in Peggy's life than I have !'

Augusta smiled. 'Don't you, my dear ? Really ?'

'No, I don't.'

'Then you are very simple, Charlotte. You know, or you don't seem to know' — Augusta viewed her work at leisure, her head a little on one side — 'that young widows may

marry again? He's been to the Cottage at least once a day since — since it happened, hasn't he?

'And if he has?' Charlotte retorted, her colour rising. 'What then?'

'He has been there this morning?'

'No, he has not!'

'Then I am sure that there must be a good reason for it.'

'There is.' Charlotte's tone was dry, and a spark of malice, for really Augusta was too provoking, showed in her eyes. 'You see, my dear, he left for London last evening, so he could not call at the Cottage this morning.'

'Left for London?' Augusta looked up. She did not make any attempt to conceal her surprise. 'What has he gone there for? And with Peggy picking up so slowly? Well, you have surprised me, Charlotte. It is the last thing I should have expected him to do — at this time.'

'But he has gone all the same. It is on Peggy's account that he has gone.'

'Ah! Then I understand. But not what he has gone for?'

'He has gone to the Admiralty to see if he can learn anything. To learn for certain what has happened. If he cannot learn there, he talks of getting a safe-conduct for France if it be possible and if he can get one. To make sure, you see, whether — whether poor Peggy's man is alive.'

'Gracious!' Augusta exclaimed, laying down her work. 'Well, he has taken it badly! Nothing stops him, it seems. London, the Admiralty, France! You don't mean after that to say that he's off with the old love? Or that he has much doubt what he will learn when he gets there! I declare he is cleverer than I thought him, much cleverer.'

Charlotte looked disturbed. 'I don't believe that he is thinking of that at all!' she said. 'He has gone because — well, because we can't keep Peggy in the dark any longer, and we must gain time. We have had pretty work to keep the paper from her and lie about it till now. We have told

her that he has taken it with him, and, while he is away, she will continue to believe, or at any rate to hope — for I don't know whether she does believe. And by the time we hear from him she will be stronger and better able to bear it.'

'A tissue of lies !' Augusta said drily. She shook her head. 'And presently you will be found out. And all the time you know very well, my dear, that there is hardly a chance that the man is alive.'

'I don't know,' Charlotte said. But she had lost her cheerful air. She looked gloomily at the carpet. 'I really don't know. I do think there is a chance. And after all,' she continued recklessly, 'Peggy is alive and is recovering, and I'd do it again to-morrow. What does it matter ? She will be able to bear the news now, whatever it be.'

'And able to reward her knight,' Augusta said lightly. 'Of course I mean, my dear, after a decent interval. For I am quite sure that he is not one to override the conventions.'

'I think you are horrid, Augusta.'

'Because I see things as they are ? And don't deceive myself as you do ? To be sure, you have seen so much of Sir Albery lately that you ought to be able to judge. But lookers-on see more of the game, Charlotte, and I think you will find that I am right.'

Charlotte rose, her face a little flushed. 'Well, at any rate he deserves her,' she said.

'And that is a comfort,' Augusta replied pleasantly, as she also rose. 'It is all as it should be, isn't it ? Must you go, dear ? Well, I dare say you will meet my father; he is somewhere in the town. Indeed, I don't know what has taken him lately. He seems to be doing the curate's work.'

Charlotte, much tried, gave way to temptation. 'Well, it was about time he did,' she said. And she escaped before Augusta could scold her.

But Augusta had known — Augustas always do know — how to touch the tender spot, and for Charlotte, as she

walked along the Rectory Lane, the day had lost something of its spring freshness. The sunshine seemed to be less bright, and when presently a bend in the road below her disclosed the sea, its rippling surface caressed by a west wind, it no longer wore the cheerful glitter that had charmed her as she came. She would have been glad to lay the blame on her friend; and more than once she told herself that Augusta was too provoking. But the change was in herself, and she knew it. She knew that it was with herself that she was annoyed. Silly dreams! Visions of which a peep in the mirror, or a glance at Peggy would have proved the folly. A grateful look earned by her devotion to another, a kind word flung to her when his heart was wrung for his old love's sake! Nothing more than that! And never, surely, had a girl bemused herself on flimsier grounds, lost herself in a glamour more unreal, taken for warm sunshine gleams more cold and wintry! 'Well, I must look in the glass!' Charlotte thought, staring ahead. 'I must look in the glass! No cure like that, my dear!'

But she thought before she had gone much farther of a better cure, and she halted at a door and knocked. It was a humble door a little beyond the barber's shop, and the woman who came out was the Jael Cruddas who had stopped Wyke in the street ten days before. He had mentioned the case to Charlotte, and so feeble are good resolutions that it must be confessed that it was the feeling that she was sharing something with him that led her to choose that house out of a dozen.

'Well, Jael,' she said cheerfully — and how was the woman to know that her heart also was sore? — 'and how are you this morning? I've just looked in as I passed. You must keep up your spirits for the little one's sake.'

'Well, miss, I'm faring middling,' the woman replied as she wiped her eyes with her apron — that was the proper etiquette in the circumstances. 'And to be surc, if anything would do me good it's the sight of your face, though

indeed you're not looking as pert as common. The Rector he's not gone five minutes, as I never thought to see wearing out a chair on my hearth ! And that forthcoming as shows how one can wrong a body. Twice he's been in and the same to others, I b'lieve.'

'I am glad to hear it,' Charlotte said, not a little surprised herself, though she had heard elsewhere of the Rector's activities.

'Aye, and nothing as he could do too much, miss. Right vexed he seemed as the Squire had been before him. But "Course we looks to him first, sir," I says, "as we always have looked, and them as was before us to his. And never found 'em wanting, I will say !"'

'And I'm sure he will not fail you now,' Charlotte said.

'No, miss, he's not one to change. But, oh, how I do sicken for news of George. I can't sleep of nights, and when I get a wink and wake and put out my hand, and he's not there — I'm that wild I can't say ! I dunno as not knowing isn't worse than knowing !'

The woman's words came home to Charlotte. There was the same aching in her breast. 'Still there's a chance, Jael,' she said. 'There is hope, you know. And Sir Albery has gone to London to do what he can !'

'God bless him for it ! And they'll tend to him, miss, that's certain, whoever goes short.'

Charlotte was not so certain of that, but she assented, said another word or two, and passed on. 'That's real sorrow !' she thought, taking herself to task, and recognising her own weakness. She had gone to hear him talked of and praised, and she had heard it, and what good had it done her ? 'The glass ! There is nothing but a good look in the glass !' she thought. 'It has come to that, my dear !'

Walking fast to relieve her feelings, she returned to the Cottage by the long road that wound round the landward side of the point, and sought a dubious and ignoble end among the pebbles and flotsam of the beach. Her upward path

left the road abreast of Budgen's house and not thirty paces from the fence that bounded his garden Charlotte paused at the parting, impressed by the silence and loneliness of the Cove. She had known it alive with the cheerful hum of men and the clatter of tools, she had been present at more than one noisy launch from it, she had stood on the beach amid cheering crowds to see the *Pride* or the *Peggy* start on her venturesome cruise; but save on a Sunday, when Devon men would rather drown than work, she had rarely if ever found the place as silent and deserted as it lay to-day. A moment's thought reminded her that it was the dinner hour, and accepting the explanation she was on the point of moving on, when her eyes were caught by a figure standing alone on the shore in the angle between the bluff and the water. The cliff above and the level sea beyond dwarfed the form, and as the silence had impressed Charlotte a moment before, the loneliness of this solitary watcher, the only human being within sight, impressed her now. Yet the man was not looking seawards. His face was turned towards her, and wondering what he did there, she shaded her eyes with her hand — there was a shimmer on the water — and she recognised him. Some impulse led her to cross the strand towards him.

'Why, Budgen,' she said lightly. 'I seldom see you idle? What are you looking at?' But she had no sooner spoken than she repented of her tone. She had forgotten his share in the calamity, and now that she was close to him she saw that the man was changed. He had a three days' beard on his chin, and he looked ill and sallow and shrunken. His answer matched his looks.

'I'm taking my leave, taking my leave,' he said, dully, his tone lifeless. He did not look at her.

'My good man!' Charlotte remonstrated. 'What do you mean?'

'Mean? I'll tell ye. Why not? Why not?' he repeated in the same dreary tone. 'D'you see that shed as I as

good as built with my own hands? And as I've laboured most part of my life in? And the slips as I've launched boats from these thirty years? And the house as my grandfather built and I've lived in since I could crawl through the door and play wi' the old shot as kept it open? And the garden and the cots? I built more than half of 'em! And the cranny here as holds all snug—so snug as I could call it all my own as far as I could see?'

His hopeless tone moved her as much as his words. Here was another change as odd as that in the Rector! She had known Budgen long, and she had never known him anything but churlish and thorny and sharp-tongued, set in a crabbed independence. She had never known him like this. But she had to answer him, and 'Yes, I see them, Budgen,' she said patiently. 'What of them?'

'They ain't mine, they ain't mine no longer. And I wish I were dead! I come here of a morning, where I can see 'em all of a piece—and how many mornings more'll I see 'em?' A sound like a groan burst from him, the first sign of feeling that he had betrayed. 'Not many more I'll see 'em. They're his, and he'll take 'em, next week or the week after! He'll take 'em, though they've been my home for sixty years! Sixty years!' he repeated drearily. 'Summer and winter, rain and shine!'

Charlotte knew his story, and though he recognised his selfishness in the face of greater griefs than his, she pitied him. 'But Joe mayn't be dead!' she said briskly. 'We don't know yet, Budgen. You're crying out before you're hurt, man.'

'He's dead!' he said. 'He's dead. I know.'

'But you cannot know!' Charlotte objected. 'There must be some alive. We know there are. It is not as bad as that, Budgen.'

'He's dead,' he repeated darkly. 'There's things as are settled for us—settled for us. If there's one dead it's him. And it's my work,' he continued in a tone that made Char-

lotte very uncomfortable. 'I might ha' known how 'twould be. I might ha' known there's them as makes the score even, though I didn't think it.'

'Come, come, Budgen,' she protested. 'You mustn't talk like that. If the worst comes to the worst and Joe's gone — but you can't know it and no one knows it — you must talk to the Rector. I don't think he'll be hard on you. I don't indeed,' Charlotte repeated with a confidence that she would not have expressed a month before.

Something more of feeling — but it was a bitter black feeling — showed in Budgen's face. 'The Rector !' he said. And in a low voice, but with exceeding venom, and regardless of her presence, he cursed him, using terrible words, words not the less terrible for the restraint that he put upon his voice.

'Man !' Charlotte cried in horror. 'You are very wicked !'

'That's all by,' he rejoined, his eyes on the white house. 'All by, now. Done and to be paid for.' He had not met her eyes, even for a moment.

She went away from him, rather unhappy than shocked. Things seemed to be all wrong, all awry; the world was full of sorrow and disappointment. She wished that she had not seen him, that she had not spoken to him. As she climbed wearily up the path to the Cottage she saw nothing of the airy grace of the gulls as they swung and poised in the ether below her, of their buoyancy and balance as they rode the incoming waves, but her ears were filled with the sadness of their wailing. She had to stand and compose herself before she could go in to Peggy, and greet her with the cheerful words and the smiling face that were needed.

CHAPTER XXXIV

THE days stole on, and brought to the little port no certain tidings. From Sir Albercy Wyke came two letters, one addressed to the Rector, and one, framed in more cautious terms and written for Peggy's eye, to Miss Bicester. He had paid two visits to the Admiralty without learning more than was known at Beremouth; Whitehall had no information, indeed beyond that which had appeared in the *Moniteur*. But his inquiries had been listened to and noted, he had penetrated to Lord St. Vincent himself, and his reception by the autocratic First Lord, the terror of the Channel Squadron, had been all that he could wish. The Service, though jealous of its interests and apt to look with no friendly eye on Letters of Marque, had still approved of the *Peggy's* exploit; the service that she had performed was deemed of value, and the matter was receiving attention. More than this could not be expected.

In the later of his two epistles Wyke spoke of a visit to Paris — from an English point of view a blood-stained city of gloomy fame — as a step that influence and patience might render feasible. The overtures that later led to the Peace of Amiens were in the making, agents, more or less accredited, were, it was rumoured, passing to and fro, and it might not be impossible under cover of their movements to obtain a safe-conduct and perhaps a letter to some one in power. There were courtesies that policy rendered advisable, and the intention which Sir Albercy had vaguely conceived when he travelled up to town was taking a clearer shape.

'Oh, but he is a friend!' Peggy cried, with tears in her

eyes. And she pressed the precious letter to her breast. 'He is a friend !'

'He is very loyal,' Charlotte replied gravely.

'To do so much ! So much for us ! I can never, never thank him enough.'

Charlotte remembered Augusta's prediction and wondered if it were already in process of fulfilment. 'No, perhaps not,' she agreed, and turned away to fetch the glass of port that her patient took at noon. No man in those days doubted the sovereign virtues of port.

Peggy, who was still very weak, seldom said as much as this, and some might have thought her apathetic. But Charlotte's devotion saw through the mask. The improvement that others, deceived by appearances, took for granted, did not blind her. Because Peggy did not give way to open lamentations, because in her bed, or later sitting up in a chair, she bore the suspense with seeming patience, and when her father or her sister visited her was gentle and passive, they fancied that all was well. It was possible, even, that they congratulated themselves on the change, and thought but slightly of the love that could so patiently endure the absence of the loved one. But Charlotte, who was always with the young wife, saw more clearly. Now and again, surprising Peggy's eyes, she read in them the dumb suffering, the mute question that sought yet flinched from an answer — the faith that still held dread at bay. And she feared for the issue. She felt at such times that the life still trembled in Peggy like a bird about to take wing. She dreaded the moment when the truth must be known and the last spark of hope extinguished.

For to hope, though a wavering hope, she was sure that Peggy still clung; of that, Charlotte had had one moment of clear vision. The Rector had suggested that Peggy should be removed to the Rectory. He had this continually at heart, and he had pressed it with something of his old authority. He had pointed out how much more comfortable

she could be made there, how much more easily nursed. 'And it will free Charlotte, too,' he had added, with a flicker of natural jealousy. 'We must not trespass too far on her, and I fear we are doing so.' Peggy had resisted, but she had said little. Weak and distrusting her self-control, she had let her father go under the impression that in a few days, when she had accustomed herself to the thought, she would consent.

But when he had left them Peggy had broken down. She had shown her heart to Charlotte. Trembling, shaken by uncontrollable agitation, and so hysterical that the other had feared for her, she had clung to her friend, crying again and again that she could not go, that she should die if they moved her! That if he came, if he came and did not find her where he had placed her, in the home sacred to him — if he did not find her there, but thought that she had forsaken him!

With difficulty Charlotte had soothed her, promised that she should not go, sworn that there should be an end of it, and with laughter and tears, that only over her body, 'And I am very strong, my dear!' should Peggy be taken away. Even so it had been with much trouble that she had restored the other to something like calmness.

But enlightened by this Charlotte was in no danger of being misled. She knew with what she had to deal, and felt no surprise that as the days passed and grew into weeks Peggy's progress was slow. Lady Bicester complained, and became even obstreperous. 'Was she to lose her daughter altogether, and see her dwindle to a nobody, living in that poky place out of the way of everybody?' she scolded. But she scolded in vain, Charlotte was firmly undutiful. She had a trust — who had confided it to her she did not say — and she was going through with it. My lady in high displeasure declared that the Rectory was very well, and so far good; but to be swallowed up by one family never an-

swered. One never got to the top of the ladder by standing on one rung.

Meantime her daughter aggravated the offence by going round in her spare hours visiting Jael Cruddas and the like, in whose houses Lady Bicester was sure that fevers and small-pox were rampant. Charlotte listened to the women's tearful complaints, and inspired hopes which she had much ado to feel, and did not feel as soon as she had turned her back on the tear-stained faces. The truth was, that she found in these visits a relief. She was faithful to her task; but there were times when the dumb question in Peggy's eyes was too much for her, when Peggy's very stillness, the stillness of one ever listening for a footstep, a sound, a something, tried her beyond bearing. Often, and more often of late, she was tempted to put an end to it; tempted to tell her how little sanguine she was herself, and how vain she thought this never-ceasing hope — or was it a make-believe of hope? Peggy must know sometime, Charlotte thought, averting her eyes that the other might not read her despair. She must know sometime — why keep her longer on the rack? And as Peggy climbed slowly back to life, and began to move about the room, and at length on one sunny morning passed through the wicket-gate and stood on the path looking down on the shimmering, winking sea, so bright, so dazzling, so smiling, and so cruel — at length it seemed to Charlotte that even in mercy the time had come to tell her; to explain on what a slender thread the hope they clung to hung, and to confess that if the scanty information they had was true — and more might never be obtained — her husband had died in his duty on that May day a month and more before.

Time, in truth, and the absence of news had exhausted Charlotte's hopes. And though Wyke was still absent and the final word was not spoken, it seemed to her to be cruel to persist in the deceit. But with the confession hovering

on her lips — she was of all women the most impulsive — she forbore. 'Not here,' she thought. 'I must tell her, if I tell her, in the house.'

Little dreaming what was in her companion's mind, Peggy, drinking in the air and the sunshine, drew her gently down the path. 'I would not go that way,' Charlotte objected. 'You will have to climb the hill again, dear.'

'I must — just a little way,' Peggy prayed. Movement and the wind had brought a faint colour to her cheeks, and she went creeping on on Charlotte's arm until the two could look down into the Cove and see Budgen's house, the idle slips, the old weed-clad hulk and the wavelets creaming on the warm beach.

'There is the stone,' Peggy murmured.

'What stone, dear?'

'The stone that he — he stepped into the boat from.'

Charlotte choked. 'Oh, my dear!' she exclaimed, not knowing whether she meant to laugh or cry. But the thought of telling Peggy was gone, wiped from her mind. It seemed a terrible thing now, to tell her; a thing to tremble at, that she could not face alone. Her father must tell her, or — or Sir Albery. She could think of no one else. She only knew that she could not do it, that the very thought of doing it sapped her courage. For a minute she could not speak. Then 'We had better go back, now, Peggy,' she urged.

But Peggy prayed that she might stay a little longer. 'It is so peaceful here,' she murmured, hanging in pensive contemplation on the other's arm. For the time she seemed to have put off her fears, to have escaped from the ever-present terror, to have ceased to listen and watch. Under the influence of the sunshine and the gentle wind that caressed her, she rested in a happy dream of hope. And Charlotte was tempted to think this mood worse than the other: to wonder afresh if it were not cruel to let her hope, to foster the confidence that had no basis, and was as deceitful as the smiling

sea that in an hour might change its face and show itself remorseless and cruel.

'Peaceful now,' she muttered, echoing Peggy's words, and uncertain how far she meant to go. 'But not always peaceful, as we know. It can change and — and be very terrible.'

'Yes, I know,' Peggy said, and Charlotte felt her stiffen herself, and knew without looking at her that her colour had faded. 'I think I am tired,' Peggy admitted in an altered tone. 'Perhaps we had better go back.'

Too late the other's heart smote her, and she could have cursed her folly. Why spoil this first change to warmth and sunshine, to the freshness and buoyancy of the open world? But aloud 'Yes, dear,' she said, 'lean on me and we shall be back in a twinkling. Don't be afraid, dear, I am as strong as a horse. I could pick you up and carry you if necessary.' Then, as the one turn in the path that they had to wind round disclosed a figure standing before the Cottage door, 'Oh, dear, dear! Charlotte exclaimed. 'There's my mother, and I am in for a scolding! And she has not seen you yet, and will have a world to say. When we get there, do you go in, dear, and leave her to me. I will keep her at bay while you lie down.'

Peggy shared her dismay. They were still at some distance from the stout figure that was making dabs at them with a fluttering handkerchief, but it was plain that Lady Bicester had recognised them. 'Don't you think that I could stay here?' Peggy suggested. 'While you go on?'

'No,' Charlotte replied. 'Certainly not. I don't stir a step from you until you are in the house. Do you go straight in when we get there, and I'll dispose of my lady.'

It was easy to say this, but Peggy was weak, and began to feel her fatigue. Before they had covered half the distance, ascending the more slowly for what was before them, Charlotte spoke again. 'Oh, dear,' she exclaimed, in a tone of disgust. 'If there aren't more of them! And this morn-

ing of all mornings ! When I don't believe a soul passed yesterday.'

Peggy saw what awaited her, faltered and stopped. For beyond Lady Bicester, and about as far from her as they were themselves, two persons were coming down the path. As Peggy caught sight of them they stopped, very much as if they had that moment seen Lady Bicester and had no mind to overtake her. In the act of stopping, one turned his back on them. He seemed to be arguing with his companion.

'It's only the Captain,' Charlotte said, reassured. 'I can see his peg.'

'But who is the other one ?' Peggy asked, as she and Charlotte moved slowly on, their eyes on the couple. She had all an invalid's distaste for strange faces.

'I think it is your father,' Charlotte replied at a venture. 'Bother them ! We shall have them all upon us at once.'

'You don't — you don't think that they are quarrelling ?' Peggy faltered. The thought of a meeting between her father and the old man frightened her.

'Why should they ? And it does not matter,' Charlotte said. 'You must get in, my dear, that's all that matters.' Then, with a gurgle of laughter, 'I believe they are no more eager to meet my lady than we are,' she added. 'But I want to see you lying down.'

They had no time for more. As Charlotte spoke, Lady Bicester, her patience exhausted, came sailing down upon them, waving her hands in protest. 'Heavens !' she cried, 'you ought not to be out, my dear ! And the wind treacherous, and you no more than a shadow ! Much use Charlotte is if she has no more sense than to let you ! She thinks everyone is as strong as herself. Come in — come in ! You could have knocked me down with a feather when I saw you gadding out.'

Peggy smiled faintly. 'But I — I am really much better,' she protested. 'And Charlotte lent me her arm.'

'If you had lent her your head, my dear, it would have been better ! You wouldn't have been out here then, I'll be bound ! But Charlotte was always like that. Leap first and look afterwards !'

'But it is so fine,' Peggy pleaded, driven to defend her friend. 'You really mustn't scold her, Lady Bicester. It was my doing. I'm sure she has been ——'

She stopped. Charlotte felt her weight sink suddenly on the arm by which she supported her, and, turning, she saw that the colour had drained from her face. Peggy's eyes, and they were frightened eyes, were fixed on some object beyond Lady Bicester. 'Peggy !' Charlotte exclaimed, as she passed her arm round her. 'What is it ? What is it, my dear ? Are you ill ? You mustn't — you mustn't give way. Let us get in !'

'There !' Lady Bicester said, between alarm and triumph. 'What did I tell you ? She was no more fit to come out than I am to dance the Boulanger ! What you can have been thinking of ——'

She stopped. For Peggy, whom Charlotte expected at every moment to collapse, freed herself from her friend's hold by an abrupt movement and crying 'Sir Albery — it's Sir Albery !' left them, gliding away as if moved by a spring. She passed Lady Bicester, she was half a dozen paces away before Charlotte recovered her wits.

The path, though safe, was narrow, and Charlotte lost not a moment in recapturing her. 'No, Peggy, no !' she said. 'No !' Let him come to us, if it is Sir Albery !' Then a glance assuring her that Peggy's anxiety had not misled her, 'See they are coming !' she urged, gently restraining Peggy, as the urgency of the crisis rose before her and redoubled her desire to have the girl within doors. 'They are coming, dear ! Be guided by me ! They will tell us in the house.'

'But he's — he's not with him,' Peggy cried, feebly withstanding her. For her there was only one 'he.'

'He could not be ! It isn't likely,' Charlotte argued. 'Come in — come in, and they will tell us !' And while Lady Bicester, divided between curiosity and excitement, fluttered about them like an excited hen, Charlotte as good as forced Peggy through the wicket and into the house.

She would have placed her in a chair, but the moment they were over the threshold Peggy, though she shook in every limb, drew herself up and waved her off. Her face, white as chalk, seemed to be all eyes, but she held herself erect, and 'I will know ! I will know !' she cried passionately. 'What is it to you ?'

Fortunately Wyke was close on their heels. He took in the scene at a glance, and he went straight to Peggy, whose colourless face and dilated eyes were as points of light in a dark room. He took her cold hand, and his look spoke before his voice. 'He is alive,' he said. 'He is alive and safe, Mrs. Bligh. He will be here presently.'

No doubt his instinct was right, and he was wise to speak. But the news was overwhelming, and as Charlotte sprang forward and took her to her generous bosom, Peggy fainted.

CHAPTER XXXV

CHARLOTTE laid her down and in masterly fashion seized the woman's advantage. She swept them all out, the Rector and the old Captain, who had followed Wyke in at the critical moment, even her mother—the last protesting much, but vainly. 'Leave her to me!' Charlotte commanded. 'Go, good people, go! You have done all the harm you can!' But while she scolded her words were but the mask beneath which she hid her feelings, while the look that her wet eyes gave Sir Albery blessed him.

And when she had turned them all out, there was one who stayed. As she bent over Peggy she found him at her elbow, she felt his hurried breathing on her cheek; when she began to busy herself, loosening the neck of Peggy's frock, she had to take a grip of herself. 'Silly man!' she said. 'How do you suppose she is to breathe if you hold her like that! Be of some use! There, get the brandy out of that cupboard! Surely you know the one! Oh, clumsy!' she exclaimed a moment later. 'Now you've broken the glass! A good thing it was not the bottle, or where should we be!' 'You don't think——' He got as far as that, and then the fear that had unnerved his hand burst forth in anger—he was suffering the worst torments of suspense. 'He was too quick!' he cried. 'He was too quick! He should have broken it to her!'

'Broken it to her!' Charlotte replied brutally. 'Rubbish! There, let her be, and give her air! And if you must be doing something, man, rub her hands instead of

mumbling them ! What a fuss ! What a pothor, and you alive, after all !

He thought her heartless. He did not know the moment that the life, that seemed to hover ready to fly from the frail form, might not escape, and this girl drolled ! He thought her incredibly cruel, unfeeling, barbarous. But when he turned to rend her he saw that, though the hand that moistened Peggy's lips was steady, the woman's tears were running down her face. And then he understood. He stayed the passionate remonstrance that rose to his lips, and 'You don't think — you don't think,' he pleaded, 'that she ——'

'I don't think anything except that she has swooned — just that !' Charlotte said, keeping her pose as well as she could. She felt Peggy's pulse, and nodded. 'She will come round in a minute,' she said. 'And do you act when she does as if you had never been away. Let her take you for granted, and we shall have no more of this nonsense. I don't know which is the bigger baby of the two !' she added with a laugh that ended abruptly.

But she did not deceive him now. 'God bless you !' he said, and he had barely said it twice, before Charlotte's prediction was fulfilled. Peggy opened her eyes. For a few seconds she stared at the ceiling. Then she seemed to grasp that things were not right and to wonder why she lay there; and she tried to rise, but feeling her weakness sank back on her elbow. As she did so her eyes fell on the brown hand that clasped hers, and for a moment she considered it. Slowly, in growing wonder, she followed the arm upwards until her eyes reached the man's face. She did not start, but a look of unspeakable content transfigured her features, and as if it were the most natural thing in the world she sank like a tired child on his breast. He held her to him, held her close, murmuring the broken words that love and worship and tenderness and all the poignant joys of a re-

union, so often pictured, so often despaired of, brought stumbling to his lips.

Charlotte watched them with hungry eyes. 'So that is it, is it !' she thought. But aloud, 'Steady, young people,' she said, as she set the glass on the floor beside them. 'Gently, gently ! And do you, my friend, give her a little more of this when you have time to think of it.'

She saw that her hour was past, that she was not wanted, and she went out softly, closing the door behind her. She joined the group that waited on the path. They had been too anxious to talk. They had stood about, exchanging anxious glances, the Rector pacing a little apart from the others, his lips moving in prayer or, it might be, in thanksgiving. The old Captain had not ceased to wipe the grateful tears from his eyes, while Lady Bicester, between starting to speak and crying 'Hush !' when anyone else spoke, had three times said that she must go.

They crowded about Charlotte, and with a word she relieved their fears. 'It is all right,' she said. 'Glory be, good people !'

'Thank God !' the Rector murmured, as he turned away to hide his emotion. 'Thank God !'

She was a great help to them. With a bravado that she did not feel and that her eyes belied, 'Why shouldn't it be right ?' she asked flippantly. 'And what next, eh ?' She looked round upon them. 'What has the hero to tell us ?'

'Haven't you left him inside ?' Wyke reminded her.

'I don't think so,' Charlotte retorted. 'Suppose you tell us the tale, Sir Albergy, while they are billing and cooing.'

It was quickly told in outline, Wyke gliding rapidly over much that his listeners had no difficulty in supplying. Encouraged by the favourable reception that he had met with at Whitehall, and by the notice that Bligh's achievement had won, he had followed up his enquiries by requesting a safe-conduct for France.

He had been told at once that this was impossible, that it was unheard of, that it was out of the question. Mr. Nepean at the Admiralty had held up his hands in horror — were we not at war? But Sir Albergy had stuck to his point, prompted by rumours heard at his club and echoed in the Press. Using his influence to the utmost he had gone from door to door, he had made himself a nuisance in this and that Government Office, and in the end a Devon member, a man of acres and weight whose nod was Olympic in more than one borough, had been persuaded to say a word to the party whip. The whip had dropped a hint to a certain Secretary, the Secretary had gone in to Lord Hawkesbury, the Foreign Minister had pooh-poohed the matter. But a suggestion had somehow come round to Wyke that if he would call on a mysterious Mr. Otto residing in Bond Street — a private gentleman of no occupation who was amusing himself, seeing the sights of London — something might be done.

He had not needed to be told twice. He had called, and Mr. Otto had shown himself amiable and anxious to oblige. Still he had feared that nothing could be done. He had shaken his head, he had doubted, considered, hesitated; at the same time he had spoken eloquently on the claims of humanity and the hardships of war.

‘I cannot think how you persisted!’ the Rector exclaimed.

Sir Albergy looked at one of his listeners in a way that made her heart leap. ‘I knew that there was one doing as much,’ he said. ‘And I could not bear to disappoint her.’

Finally, he said, Mr. Otto had yielded. He had whispered that two gentlemen, who had urgent business in Paris, were crossing on a certain night, and that the addition of a third, if duly accredited and carrying a letter in his, Mr. Otto’s handwriting, might conceivably pass unnoticed. Wyke had felt and expressed becoming gratitude, and three days later, cloaked in some capacity that he did not understand, but that everywhere met with consideration, he had crossed, landed on the enemy’s soil, and after spending a night at Dessein’s

at Calais and a night at Amiens had found himself installed at Pujol's Hotel in Paris. There he was apparently free to do what he pleased, but he had not doubted that unwinking eyes watched him and that none of his words fell to the ground.

Prudently he had lost no time in going about his business. He had presented Mr. Otto's letter at the Ministry of Marine, and had been received with the same mysterious politeness, though in an office which might have been cleaner. He had been heard with patience, and after some delay had been invited to repeat his visit in three or four days. He had spent the interval in renewing his acquaintance with a city so interesting to English eyes, and in visiting the places that a few years before had witnessed the passage of the tumbrils to the guillotine. He missed the old magnificence, the outward decency. He found the streets dirty, their very names altered. Buildings, the splendour of which he recalled, stood sadly in need of repair, the faces that he met in the street were reserved and suspicious, while the vehicles that drove him into the gutter and splashed him to the eyes would have disgraced a cockney tradesman. In every public place an astonishing indecorum flaunted itself.

But everywhere he met with courtesy and passed unchallenged, and his success on the fourth day when he called at the Ministry surpassed his hopes. He was informed that the persons about whose well-being he was solicitous were confined in the prison at Quimper, and that the Capitaine de Corsaire Bligh was alive and recovering from his injuries: that as a mark of the Minister's particular consideration, evoked by the amiable representations made to him, an order for the Capitaine's release would be issued and such arrangements made as would enable him to join the English Milord at Boulogne. Of the *matelots*, taken with him, care would be taken until — the smiling official had bowed and left it to be understood that an unnamed but happy event loomed in the future.

'And that's — that's all,' the narrator concluded lamely.

'All !' one of his listeners cried. 'All ?'

'Or, no, not quite all,' he replied, correcting himself with a smile. 'I called at the Admiralty on my return to thank Mr. Nepean. He made me no definite promises — promises are not much in their way — but he said as much as that — that Mr. Bligh's case would be considered. I think, therefore, that there is good hope that——' He broke off. 'For God's sake, sir, don't !' he exclaimed, retreating in ludicrous dismay before the old Captain, who, overcome by his feelings, had fallen on his knee and would have kissed his hand. 'For God's sake, sir, I beg you to get up.'

It was an absurd scene. Sir Alberty's horror, the old man's inability to raise himself without help, Lady Bicester's amazement, the Rector's kindly interposition. Yet, though they smiled, there was hardly a dry eye among them, and when Charlotte softly clapped her hands, and cried 'Who is the hero now ?' the laugh that followed brought a welcome relief from tension. They crowded about the Captain, taking him by the hand, forgiving him and giving him joy.

'Bravo !' Charlotte said. 'And now, good people, there is someone else who would like to thank Sir Alberty. And the Rector will no doubt wait and see Peggy. But my work is done, and I am for home. Come, mother, better late than never !'

The Rector, however, said he would see his daughter by and by, when she was more composed; and Sir Alberty, sheering off with craven alacrity, said he would accompany them. So while the old Captain, bareheaded and mumbling thanksgivings, pegged away to his lodging, the other four took the upward path. As far as the churchyard they walked in couples, the Rector leading with Wyke.

'I suppose you have heard Bligh's story ?' the Rector asked.

'Yes. And a very fine story it is, sir.'

The Rector did not evince as much enthusiasm as the other expected. His face was serious, and when he spoke again

his words came haltingly. 'Did he — what was his impression, I mean — about the corvette? Did he think that she was lying by for the *Lively Peggy*? Waiting for her, I mean?'

'Waiting for her? I don't think that he gave me that impression. What makes you think so?'

'But didn't he learn after the capture? I should have thought that he would have learned — if it was so. From her papers or her people?'

'If he had I think he would have told me,' Wyke declared. 'I had long talks with him, and he said nothing to that effect to me. I don't think he had it in his mind. It was not as if the *Peggy* cruised regularly and they had reason to expect her. What made you think of it?'

The Rector's answer was lame. 'I fancy that it was a word that fell from Copestake,' he explained. But he seemed, having said this, to shake a weight from his shoulders, and he walked with a lighter step, he swung his cane. 'She fell in with the brig so handily, I wondered, you see.'

'As far as I gathered the corvette was in her usual track, and the *Peggy* had just the bad luck to cross it at the moment.'

'Just so, just so,' the Rector agreed. 'But — one moment!' He stopped abruptly. The worried look had returned to his face. 'Joe Fewster? Budgen's nephew, you know. He — he was one of the — of the lost, I fear?'

'Fewster?' Wyke laughed. 'Why, he's here. He came over with us. You hadn't time to hear, I suppose. The scamp passed himself off as the Captain's servant, fetched and carried for him and got an extra ration, which was just what he was fit for! They released him with Bligh. Joe lost?' Wyke shrugged his shoulders. 'No such luck, sir! He's the kind of bad penny that is sure to turn up when better men like poor Toll are lost.' And then, 'Why, Rector,' he added in surprise, 'you look as if you had — as if that little scamp's life or death mattered much to any one.'

But the Rector was not heeding him. He seemed to be un-

conscious of his presence. He raised his hat and looked over the sea. 'Dear Lord,' he murmured in a tone of feeling so real that it redoubled Wyke's surprise, 'I thank Thee !' And for a space he stood uncovered and let the breeze fan his face.

Wyke wondered. 'But, man alive !' he protested, 'there are better men gone, and for my part I could have spared Fewster very well.'

The Rector put on his hat, and came back to himself. Yet not to his ordinary self, for his face wore a brightness that would have kept his companion puzzling if he had not, in a shame-faced fashion, explained himself. 'Yes, to be sure,' he said. 'But he was the last life in Budgen's lease — of the Cove, you know. And it would have been a sore blow to the man.'

Wyke nodded. 'I see,' he said. 'Well, it does you credit.' Then before he could say more Lady Bicester, leaning on Charlotte's arm, overtook them. Steep ascents did not suit her figure, and she had stood more than once to admire the view. They all passed into the churchyard together, but changed partners there, Sir Albery falling back with Charlotte, and following the others.

The girl's heart was full, and though she knew it would be wiser to be silent she could not refrain from speech. 'You have done so much ! So much for her !' she said with feeling. 'I am sorry that she cannot show her gratitude as you deserve.'

Wyke looked at her. 'Who cannot ?' he asked.

'Peggy. You have done so much for her, I don't know how she can bear it !'

'She can bear it very well,' he said. 'Here, let us go round this way !' He turned right-handed towards the walk that hung over the sea.

Charlotte stopped. 'But my mother will be waiting,' she said.

'Let her wait,' he replied coolly. 'Come this way.'

Then, as she reluctantly complied, 'Now,' he said bluntly, 'tell me what you meant by that.'

'What I meant?' Charlotte began, but she did not find it easy to explain. She was not at her best. 'You know what I mean without my telling you. What is the use of — of pretending?'

'None. But you've got to tell me all the same.'

'Good gracious! Why, Sir Albery, when you know? If Peggy were unmarried or — or widowed, poor girl ——' She shrugged her shoulders.

But he seemed to be determined to make her say it. 'Well,' he retorted, 'and if Peggy were unmarried, or — or widowed, what then?'

'You want to drive me into a corner,' she protested.

'Perhaps I do.'

'Well, if she had not a husband, if you will have it, she could marry you, couldn't she?'

'But if I don't want to marry her — what then?'

Charlotte coloured with vexation. 'Of course you don't,' she said pettishly. 'Or ought not to — because she is married. But you know very well what I mean. I wish I had not spoken.'

'But you don't know what I mean,' he rejoined. 'I did wish to marry her — a year ago. No one knows that better than you do. But I don't want to marry her now. On the contrary, I want to marry someone else.'

Charlotte laughed, though her face was hotter than she could have wished. 'Oh, dear, I wish you had not told me!' she said. 'I did think you so faithful! Now you have dispelled another dream — of men's constancy and all that, you know.' She tried to speak with her usual flippancy, but she was not very successful.

'And all that, Charlotte?'

'To be sure!'

'It has given you a low opinion of me?' He stepped in front of her and penned her up against the low wall. He

was looking at her, too, in such a way that she did not know where to look, and she knew her face was hot, and she would have given the world for her usual manner. Why, why in the world had she been so foolish as to broach the matter?

But he was determined to have an answer. 'It has given you a low opinion of me?' he persisted.

She longed to face him, but she could not. She turned away and picked a bit of mortar from the wall and tossed it over the edge. 'I didn't say so,' she said.

'And you haven't asked me whom I am going to marry.'

Charlotte turned to bay — was he just tormenting her? 'No,' she said, 'and you ought not to tell me. You ought to tell her first.'

'I have told her.'

Charlotte took another scrap of mortar and flung it over the wall. Then she turned to him, and apparently she had thrown with it the colour from her face. But her voice was steady. 'Then tell me, please, who it is,' she said. 'I think she is a very lucky girl, whoever it is.'

'You think so?'

'Yes, I do,' she said.

'I am glad of that,' he replied, 'because, Charlotte, you are the girl. And if you will take me, I think I can promise you that I shall not — shift again. There is no man worth calling a man who has known you as I have known you and watched you as I have watched you, these last months — who has seen your unselfishness and your devotion, my dear, who could help loving you if he loved truth and goodness. Who would not say, here is my friend, here is the woman with whom I desire to pass my life, whom I want to sit at my table, who will never fail me —'

'Oh, but,' she stammered, looking anywhere but at him, 'it's — it's impossible! You are playing with me. I'm — I'm sure you haven't thought!' Then, 'I'm only plain Charlotte,' she added wildly.

'Never plain to me,' he said; 'but the woman I love and desire, Charlotte; the woman I want to be my companion, my wife and the mother of my children. Never plain to me, since the day that you stopped me on the road in the kindness of your heart — and I had the first inkling of what you were.'

'It wasn't out of the kindness of my heart,' Charlotte said doggedly. 'I won't wear borrowed plumes.'

'Then why was it?'

Charlotte looked every way save at him, but there was a shy light in her eyes that for the moment did make her almost beautiful. She had sat down on the wall, as if she could not help herself, and with a hand on each side of her she plucked at it. 'Well,' she said, 'if you must know, it was — it was ——' And there she stopped, unable to get the words out. Yet she knew that if she did speak them she was safe.

'Then why was it?' he repeated. 'Come, you must tell me.'

'Well, then, it was because I was fond of you — then,' she confessed. 'Now you can laugh at me!'

'Many times, I hope,' he said. And he did laugh.

CHAPTER XXXVI

LIFE and death jostle one another. The day, and sometimes the news, that bears joy to some brings grief to their fellows. It was so in Beremouth. The first vague reports had exaggerated the loss on the *Lively Peggy*, and there were homes besides the Cottage to which Wyke went with his news — and we may be sure that he lost no time — and brought rejoicing with him. But from eleven hearths the bread-winners had passed, never to return, and in lane and court there were wailing and sorrow, and about a door here and there a cluster of whispering women. So it had always been, and so it was now. And now, as in the past, old age humped its shoulders and bore the blow with seeming apathy, while the young met it with piteous protests against fate. Sea-boots stiff with the spray of many storms were set apart, to be held henceforth hallowed things; and eyes that had often gleamed with wrath at the goodman's shortcomings, now dwelt pitifully on the darned jersey or the patched overalls.

Yet it was something even to those who took their loss most hardly, that that loss was public, was marked and recognised. That when the old slunk for a little comfort into the Keppel's Head the room fell silent about them, and that when the women went to church on the next Sunday their neighbours gathered to go with them. It was something, too, that the Squire moved tirelessly from house to house with grave eyes and assurances of help — of a place for Dan when he should be old enough, and the like. The kindly hand-grip, the feeling words, 'He was a good man,

Jenny, and will not be forgotten. He died in his duty, and the lads may be proud of him !' were not wasted, nor the 'God bless you, sir,' that came from a full heart when he left. In a little community there is fellowship.

Yet it was probable that the Rector's visits went for more, for they were less expected. Women told with pride how he had sat down with them on that very chair ! So many could say it, indeed, that his stately passage from house to house was watched with wonder by awe-struck eyes. He was amazingly changed, they agreed; the curate could not have said more nor done more ! He did not seem like the same man, they whispered, looking after him. Or, to be sure, they had never known the man before, and it needed right-down trouble to bring him out.

But in fact he was changed. So changed that no woman of them all, much as they marvelled, was more perplexed by the alteration or less able to account for it than the woman who knew him best, and fancied that she knew him *au fond*. Not that Augusta had been blind to the change in its earlier stages. She had seen it take now one form and then another. She had seen it show itself in a settled gloom, the secret of which she could not penetrate, later in an irritation as puzzling and more vexatious. But the form it had finally taken, of a benevolence less at one with the man she knew and on whom she had formed herself than either, chafed her to the verge of impoliteness. And when, on the afternoon of Bligh's return, her father entered the drawing-room and with a beaming face poured out the news, which she had heard an hour or two earlier, and he showed in every feature a satisfaction which she could neither share nor understand, it was as much as even Augusta could do to hold her feelings in check.

'Well, as you are so pleased, sir, I am glad,' she forced herself to say, as she bent over her frame. 'But — do you really think that it is for the best ?'

'My dear ! Surely ! Surely !' he protested. 'God forbid

that we should think otherwise ! Besides, you know your sister, and were it only for her sake —— ’

‘Yes, I know, father.’ Augusta left her needle in the canvas, and looked at him with a puzzled brow as if she might still read the riddle. ‘Of course, we are glad that the man, is alive — were that the end, sir. But she was recovering, and is it so certain that it is for the best ? After all, things are as they were, and — and I thought that you agreed with me, indeed, I thought it was your own opinion — that they could hardly be worse.’

His rising colour betrayed his annoyance. ‘But I don’t agree,’ he said testily, ‘that things are as they were, Augusta.’

She examined her work with an air of detachment, a faint smile curving her lips. ‘Perhaps it is,’ she suggested softly, ‘that you do not look at them as you did, sir !’

He paused before he answered her. ‘Perhaps it is,’ he admitted at last. ‘Yes, Augusta, I think that that is so. The truth is, since I formed that opinion I have been face to face with worse things. With worse things,’ he repeated, with an uneasy gesture. ‘And I can see that I was wrong. The thing is done, and for the future I intend to make the best of it.’

Augusta submitted gracefully. ‘You know best, sir,’ she said. ‘If that is your view, there is no more to be said.’

‘No.’ Then more lightly, and as if he was glad to get away from the topic, ‘I have another piece of news for you. I shall be very much surprised if we do not hear that there is something between Wyke and your friend Charlotte.’

Augusta’s needle stopped half-way through the canvas. She laughed. ‘I can believe it of one side, sir,’ she said, ‘I have seen it for some time. Charlotte ? Yes. But it will take a good deal to make me believe it of the other. Augusta bent her neck gracefully and smiled. ‘I have known her look passable — by some lights. But Sir Albery has eyes — and after Peggy ! Think of it. No, sir, Charlotte is a dear

girl, but I am afraid that her best friends cannot call her a beauty !'

'Well, I may be mistaken,' the Rector admitted, thinking that his daughter must know. Women saw things, no doubt. 'But they were very long in following her mother and me just now, and when they came up the young lady looked odd, and Wyke seemed to be uncommonly pleased with himself.'

'He would have to look like that,' Augusta cried cryptically. She was not disturbed. She understood, she fancied, both why Sir Alberty had frequented the Cottage and why Charlotte had shared his assiduity. He had had his hopes, or he had not acted as he had or gone to so much trouble. Disappointed in the upshot he had no option but to hide his feelings.

The Rector was not greatly interested; he had things on his mind that touched him more nearly and he left the room. He took his hat and went out. In charity with all men, to one of whom he had long thought too hardly, he was eager to do justice. 'I've wronged the man,' he told himself, 'and I will go to him before I sleep. The news will be as welcome to him as to me, and the least I can do is to give him joy of it.'

He went by the road, and was well on his way to the Cove when he met the doctor in his gig. His first thought was that the news had been too much for the old Captain, who after the scene at the Cottage had returned to his lodging. He stopped the doctor. 'Nothing wrong, I hope, Hawkins ?'

The doctor shook his head. 'You haven't heard ? About Budgen, sir ? He has had a stroke. And I fear a bad one.'

The Rector stared. 'Good gracious !' he said. He was more moved than the other had anticipated. 'You don't mean it ? How did it happen ?'

'Well, that young Fewster — Joe, you know, confound him ! — went straight down to the Cove, came on Budgen suddenly, and the man threw up his arms and fell as if he had seen a ghost ! Never spoke again.'

The Rector's face was serious. 'Perhaps he thought that he saw a ghost,' he said.

'Upon my honour I should not be surprised. He had given the lad up for lost, I'm told. But he ought to have had more sense, a man of his age !'

'Can he speak ?'

The other shook his head. 'No, and I doubt if he ever will. He may rally and linger for a few months, but I fear that will be the best of it. Hang that young cub !' the doctor added viciously. 'I never knew any good of him, first or last.'

The Rector asked another question or two, his tone betraying a feeling that surprised the other. Like the women the doctor had not thought that he had it in him to feel. Finally, 'I will go on and see Budgen,' he said, 'if there is no objection.'

The doctor had nothing to say against it, and the Rector went on. He stood beside the bed, and he was moved to the depths of his soul, as he looked down at the wreck of the man whom he had hated so deeply and to whose account he had set down so much of his own suffering. There was no longer anything to hate or fear in that helpless form, in which, setting aside the laboured breathing, the eyes alone lived. And presently, the woman in attendance having gone out, the Rector knelt beside the bed and prayed as he might have prayed for himself, with contrition and self-abasement ; using the words of the Confession, 'according to Thy promise, spare those that are penitent !' He repeated the words thrice and fervently. When he rose from his knees he took Budgen's nerveless hand in his, and held it for some moments, looking pitifully down at him. And before he let the hand go, he pressed it. When he had assured him more than once — though he doubted if there were any who heard — that he should return, he left him.

But as with a heavier step he climbed the path his mind was troubled and his face reflected his trouble. He did not

know. He could not be sure; and the uncertainty oppressed him. It hung over him like a cloud in a fair sky, darkening the prospect. And possibly it was as well that this was so. The habits of years cannot be cut down in a day or a month, nor the attitude of a mind long warped be lightly amended. The change wrought in the Rector by the pangs of a conscience — that of itself argued a man spoiled by prosperity but far from evil — might have proved but a passing and transient phase if in his pensive moments he had not had that uncertainty, that doubt to trouble him.

Even as he climbed the path it influenced his actions. When he reached the Cottage, that Cottage which had been his bugbear, which he had so long and so wrathfully shunned, he turned in at the gate and knocked at the door. Bligh opened it, and seeing who it was, stood uncertain in what spirit his visitor came. But over his shoulder the Rector saw his daughter's face, no longer haggard and woebegone, and his purpose held.

'Bligh,' he said, and he offered his hand, 'we will let bygones be bygones. We have both been to blame, but we will let the past bury its dead.'

And Bligh, the instinct to revolt disarmed by the other's address, was able to meet him. He clasped the offered hand. 'I, at any rate, am to blame, sir,' he said frankly. 'But if you will suffer Peggy to plead for me?'

'We will say no more,' the Rector rejoined. And with Peggy's clinging arms about him, and her faithful heart beating against his breast, he had his reward. The father and daughter had met before; he had sat beside her bed, he had prayed with her, he had done his best to comfort her. But there had been unspoken things between them, a fence raised by old grievances, by wrongs and resentment. Now the fence had fallen and they were at one.

He sat with them, her hand in his, and while he listened to Bligh's story and Peggy hung with parted lips upon the tale, he began to know the man and to own him to be other

than he had imagined. More, as he let his eyes travel round the room, neat and orderly and possessed of a dignity of its own, he confessed that his horror of it had had as little foundation as his contempt of the man.

When he rose he was moved to own it, albeit with a tinge of his old manner. 'My dear,' he said, 'you are more comfortable here than I supposed. But — we must make other arrangements. You must let me see to that, Bligh.'

Bligh winced, and might have protested. But Peggy's hand lay in his, and he accepted the words with a good grace. 'We will do whatever you think fit, sir,' he said.

On the threshold 'God bless you, my dear,' the Rector murmured as he kissed his daughter. 'May you and your husband see many happy years!'

It was his final eirenikon. His heart as he climbed the path and crossed the churchyard was lighter than it had been for many months.

His generosity, as things shaped themselves, was not taxed to the extent that he contemplated. For a week later the bells of Beremouth broke into a merry peal and the countryside, startled at work or play, presently learned that Lieutenant Charles Bligh, late of the Royal Navy, had in consideration of special services performed as commander of the private ship of war, the *Lively Peggy*, been restored to his rank, and placed on half-pay. Nor was the pride of the neighbourhood lessened — while the old man wept for joy — when a month later the same Lieutenant Charles Bligh, R.N., was gazetted to a post in connection with the Government Service at Falmouth. Thither, with a handsome allowance from his father-in-law, he and his wife by and by removed. Among the earliest guests whom they entertained in their snug house at Flushing, looking upon the Ferry and the Penryn River, were Sir Alberty and Lady Wyke, between whom and their host and hostess a very special friendship was understood to exist.

To probe into Augusta's feeling when the certainty of Charlotte's engagement dawned upon her would be unkind. That her opinion of Sir Albery both as a man and as a match was lessened is certain. But no one gave the happy couple joy with more sweetness and composure, nor did Charlotte cease to be one of her dearest friends. And as acknowledged merit seldom misses its reward, and the deserts of Augusta's classic features and graceful figure could not be denied, less than a year elapsed before she was sought by a fitting partner and removed to grace the house of a neighbouring pluralist. In a sphere so peculiarly her own her manners and her smile had their full value, nor did her performance of her duties fall below the standard that was expected of her. Augusta in truth had but one failing. She lacked a heart.

Old Captain Bligh did not forget the fire that had singed him. He put his weakness behind him, and with it the days when he had rolled in the gutter and been viewed with an indulgent eye by the company at the Keppel Head. He found it easy in the sunshine of his son's prosperity to turn over a new leaf, but he never succeeded in holding up his head — the iron of adversity had gone over him. He continued to live in the Cottage, and if proof were needed of the Rector's changed views it was to be found in the tolerance with which he regarded his neighbour's presence. This went so far in time, that it was no uncommon thing to see him on a sunny morning pacing the churchyard walk by the side of the mild old man whose stumping tread was no stranger on the Rectory floors.

For, as has been said, the change in the Rector persisted. On the Bench he was more human and more lenient, in his parish more frequent. He viewed his curate as a man if not as a brother. For he never knew. He was never to have the question that still at times dwelt upon his mind answered. Budgen lingered for the better part of a year; but he never

regained the power of speech, and whether he had indeed been guilty of that terrible crime the Rector, though he often visited him and often sat with him, never knew. The doubt remained to chasten him. Yet as time passed and insensibly mitigated the memory of those painful days, he inclined more and more to the charitable view of that and of many other things. For, with all his faults, he had, unlike Augusta, a heart.

THE END

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